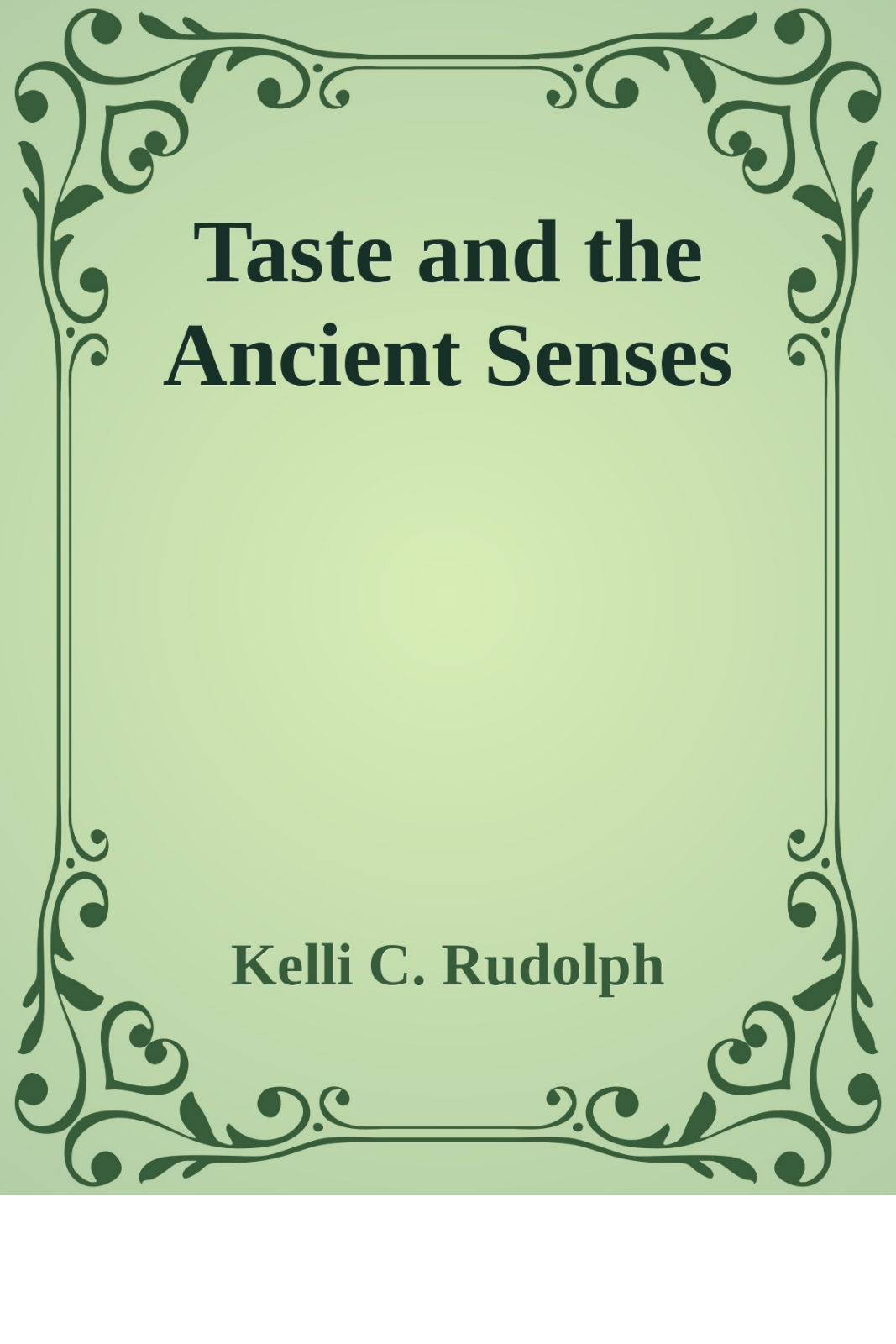


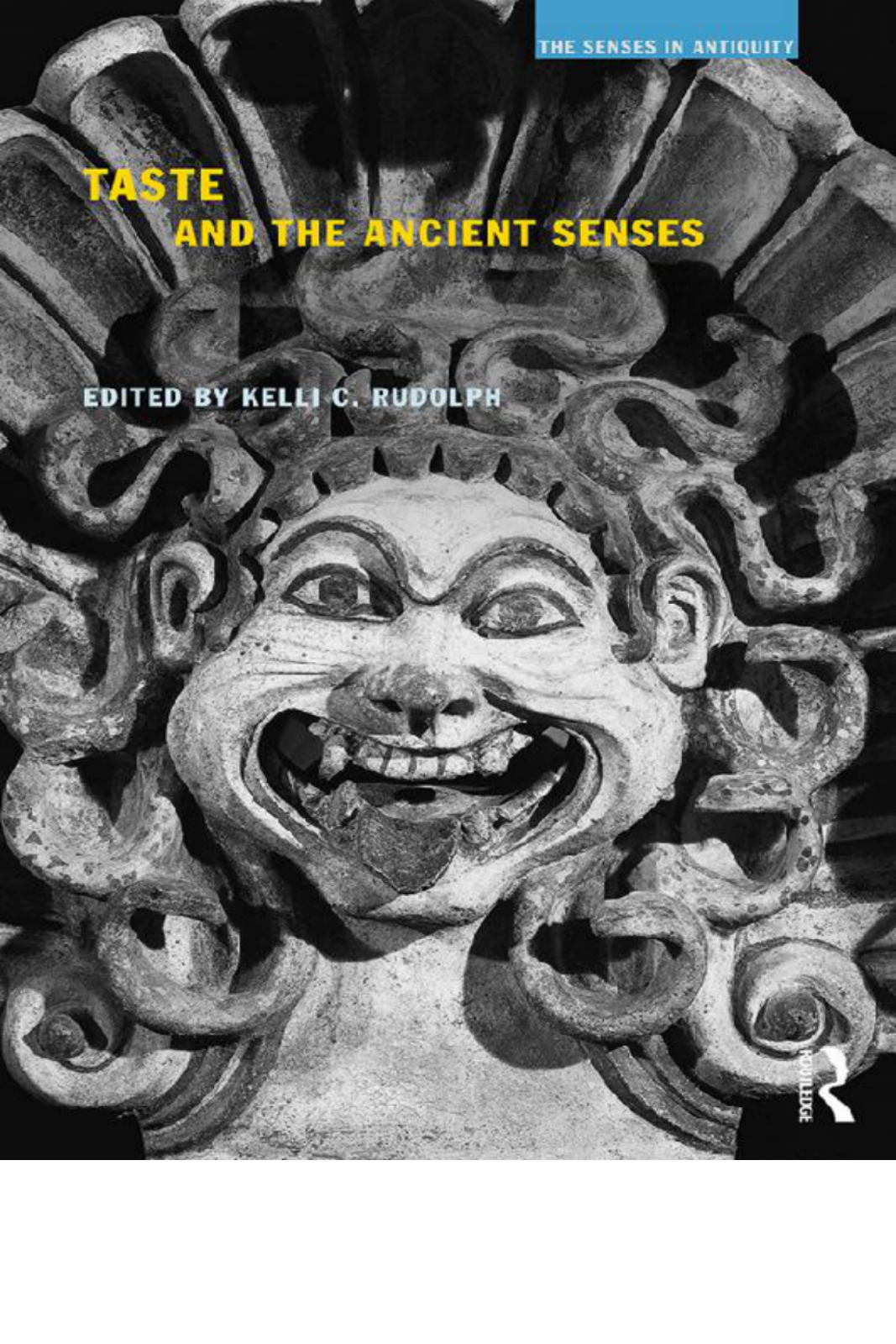
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Taste and the Ancient Senses

Kelli C. Rudolph

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THE SENSES IN ANTIQUITY

TASTE AND THE ANCIENT SENSES

EDITED BY KELLI C. RUDOLPH

ROUTLEDGE

Taste and the Ancient Senses

Olives, bread, meat and wine: it is deceptively easy to evoke ancient Greece and Rome through a few items of food and drink. But how were their tastes different from ours? How did they understand the sense of taste itself, in relation to their own bodies and to other modes of sensory experience? This volume, the first of its kind to explore the ancient sense of taste, draws on the literature, philosophy, history and archaeology of Greco-Roman antiquity to provide answers to these central questions.

By surveying and probing the literary and material remains from the Archaic period to late antiquity, contributors investigate the cultural and intellectual development of attitudes towards and theories about taste. These specially commissioned chapters also open a window onto ancient thinking about perception and the body. Importantly, these authors go beyond exploring the functional significance of taste to uncover its value and meaning in the actions, thoughts and words of the Greeks and Romans. *Taste and the Ancient Senses* presents a full range of interpretative approaches to the gustatory sense, and is an indispensable resource for students and scholars of classical antiquity and sensory studies.

Kelli C. Rudolph is Lecturer in Classics and Philosophy at the University of Kent, Canterbury. She has research interests in ancient perceptual theories and the relationship between Presocratic and Hellenistic philosophy, and is currently working on theoretical approaches to the senses in antiquity.

THE SENSES IN ANTIQUITY

Series editors: Mark Bradley, University of Nottingham, and Shane Butler, Johns Hopkins University

Like us, ancient Greeks and Romans came to know and understand their world through their senses. Yet it has long been recognized that the world the ancients perceived, and the senses through which they channelled this information could operate differently from the patterns and processes of perception in the modern world. This series explores the relationship between perception, knowledge and understanding in the literature, philosophy, history, language and culture of ancient Greece and Rome.

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For Dorothy Howard
Who taught me about good taste
and
For Celandine Isla,
My own sweet one

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Introduction

On the tip of the tongue: making sense of ancient taste

Kelli C. Rudolph

ἄρτος γὰρ ἐραστῇ σοφίας διαρκῆς τροφή, παρέχουσα καὶ τὰ σώματα ἄνοσα καὶ τὸν λογισμὸν ὑγιῇ καὶ ἐν τοῖς μάλιστα νηφάλιον· ὄψα δὲ καὶ μελίπηκτα καὶ ἡδύσματα καὶ ὅσα σιτοπόνων καὶ ὀψαρτυτῶ περιεργίαι τεχνιτεύουσι καταγοητεύουσαι τὴν ἄμουςον καὶ ἀφιλόσοφον καὶ ἀνδραποδωδεσάτην τῶν αἰσθήσεων γεῦσιν, ὑπηρετοῦσαν καλῶ μὲν οὐδενὶ θεάματι ἢ ἀκούσματι, γαστρὸς δὲ τῆς ταλαίνης ἐπιθυμίαις, νόσους σώματι καὶ ψυχῇ κατασκευάζει πολλάκις ἀνιάτους.

For bread to a lover of wisdom is ample nourishment and affords bodies freedom from disease as well as healthy reasoning and sobriety in the highest degree. But relishes, honey-cakes, sweet seasonings and all the over-elaborations which are fabricated by pastry-cooks and foodies and bewitch the taste – which is lacking in culture and philosophy, the most slavish of the senses, a servant not to what is beautiful to see or to hear but to the pleasures of the wretched belly – create often incurable diseases in the body and soul.

(Philo, *The Special Laws* 1.173.4–175.1)

Taste and the Ancient Senses brings together material and literary remains of Graeco-Roman antiquity to explore the sense disparaged here above all others: that of gustatory sensation. In his acerbic pronouncement against the sense of taste, Philo, a first-century BCE/CE Jewish philosopher, gives voice to a pervasive ambivalence that suffuses ancient thinking about taste.¹ While no one denies the functional importance of this sense in sustaining life by seeking out nourishment and rejecting poison, its seemingly primitive nature – its intimacy with its objects of perception in humans and even the most basic animals – relegates taste to the bottom of the sensory hierarchy alongside the other proximal senses, touch and smell. Sight and hearing, by contrast, are given pride of place, not only because as distance senses they retain some supposed objectivity in the process of perception, but also because these senses are linked with the acquisition of cultural and philosophical knowledge. Taste, by contrast, is seen as bodily, inarticulate and meaningless.² The baseness of taste is suggested, both here and throughout the Western intellectual tradition, by its link to incorrigible pleasure.³ Kant makes

a forceful programmatic distinction between touch, sight and hearing, which he argues contribute to “the cognition of the exterior object”, and taste and smell, which for him are “more subjective than objective, that is, the idea obtained from them is more an idea of enjoyment, rather than the cognition of the external object”.⁴ Humans seek out what is pleasurable (or “sweet”) and avoid what is not; neutral tastes are rare, and insipid, “tasteless” flavours are among those to avoid.⁵ In its link with the enticing and enjoyable, Philo sees indulgence in the pleasures of taste as an invitation to sensuality, gluttony and excess that degrades body and soul.⁶

Prevalent though such views may be, they by no means represent the only opinions about taste in antiquity. This volume offers a new and provocative exploration of the functional, sensual and socio-cultural role the sense of taste plays within the cultural and intellectual milieux of ancient Greece and Rome. By bringing together a variety of material and literary sources, across a broad chronological and geographical spectrum, we aim to inspire new interdisciplinary connections in the study of taste and the ancient senses. This introduction will contextualise the volume’s structure and contributions with three broad, preliminary observations. First, I explore some of the theoretical underpinnings that have shaped recent scholarship on taste, before turning to the concept of taste itself. Finally, I examine the relationship between taste and the other senses as revealed in ancient theorising about the organ, process and cultural significance of taste.

Scholarly attention has begun to shift with increasing intensity towards the qualities and characteristics of the senses.⁷ Central to the development of sensory studies is the theoretical groundwork laid in the last sixty years in the fields of anthropology, history and literature.⁸ In the introduction to his 1964 *Le cru et le cuit*, Claude Lévi-Strauss asserts that “certain categorical opposites drawn from everyday experience with the most basic sorts of things – e.g. ‘raw’ and ‘cooked,’ ‘fresh’ and ‘rotten,’ ‘moist’ and ‘parched,’ and others – can serve a people as conceptual tools for the formation of abstract notions and for combining these into propositions”.⁹ The practices that we as individuals and societies adopt around food preparation and consumption are ripe for interpretation. Roland Barthes argues that food is “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behavior” that can be deciphered and allowed to speak with a grammar all its own.¹⁰ But of what does food speak? Barthes goes on to suggest that food permits the diner to

“insert himself daily into his own past and to believe in a certain culinary ‘being’”, whereas Pierre Bourdieu suggests that our tastes – physical and aesthetic – are shaped by the communities to which we belong or aspire to belong.¹¹ Regardless of the theoretical stance one takes towards the senses, it is clear that these approaches have influenced the way we think about sensory culture. Indeed, since the 1980s, anthropologists like Paul Stoller have championed non-visual and non-verbal modes of experience as a way of investigating other cultures, and taste plays a key role in these studies, which seek to understand the relationships that exist between the senses and the way in which different cultures utilise their sensory apparatus.¹²

In historical studies too we find that a cultural approach to history lays the groundwork for sensory studies.¹³ In particular, studies of individual flavours inaugurate the history of particular sensations: Mintz’s *Sweetness and Power* (1985) traces the socio-cultural, political and economic history of sucrose; similar studies trace the histories of spices, salt and chocolate.¹⁴ Synoptic analyses have been served up in most historical sub-disciplines from the ubiquitous treatment of food, dining and consumption in cultural histories¹⁵ to the similarly encompassing accounts of consumption and the objects, rituals and trade in food in classical studies.¹⁶ Dunbabin, Davidson and Wilkins explore the ancient social and cultural history of food and consumption through the frameworks of ancient comedy, symposiastic literature and art.¹⁷

Depictions of food and eating also, of course, play a role in literary studies, where sensory imagery and stylistic metaphors of the material and processes of consumption have long attracted scholarly attention.¹⁸ Interests in discourse and genre have guided developments in this area of classical studies, notably in the work of our contributor Emily Gowers, who utilises a deconstructive theoretical framework to illuminate readings of comestibles in ancient texts.¹⁹ An array of interpretative options have been set out for the reader interested in food and its preparation, dining imagery and metaphor in ancient literature.²⁰

Our access to the ancient past is mediated by texts and objects that cannot directly allow us to recreate the tastes and savours of antiquity. Although this volume does include discussion of the contexts for and objects of taste, the reader will find no recipes here, nor a discussion of food as such. Nutrition, eating and cooking, however, play an important role in determining the tastes of things, and the essays gathered in this volume provide a rich variety of

approaches to the sense of taste in antiquity. The contributors cross disciplinary boundaries in their study of the ancient world to offer a smorgasbord for the reader interested not simply in eating and food, but in how the sense of taste highlights ideas, practices, debates, habits and intellectual speculation. Some of these will seem familiar and fundamental to the contemporary study of the classical past, but others will seem foreign and unexpected. This volume offers close engagement with diverse sensory aspects of taste and flavour in the ancient world. The place of taste in Greek and Roman thought about sensory perception, cognition and aesthetic pleasure is crucial, but until now has remained ill-defined. In different ways, each chapter of this book builds an answer to two questions: what did taste mean and what can it tell us about vital developments in Western civilisation?

The experience of taste

The fascination with taste categories goes back to the earliest theoretical analysis of the sense. Terminology and vocabulary have been an important part of Graeco-Roman – and consequently Western – thinking about taste; the chapters by Rudolph, Totelin, Boulay and Paulas explore various aspects of this development. What begins for Democritus (fifth century BCE) as an analysis of flavour, for Aristotle (fourth century BCE) becomes a spectrum of taste between sweet and bitter, and Pliny (first century CE) later entertains the possibility that tastes may be infinite.²¹ When we turn to the Renaissance and Early Modern period, we find that theorising about the flavours depends heavily on the insights of our ancient sources. The lists of flavours offered by Fernel (1581) resemble those found in Pliny (the latter discussed by Paulas in [Chapter 12](#)). Haller (1786) expanded this range to include “urinous” and “spirituous” and Rudolphi (1823) followed Pliny’s suggestion that tastes are infinite. However, by the early nineteenth century, Horn (1825) was also arguing that many of the so-called “tastes” that proliferated in the lists of earlier theorists actually stimulated other modalities. The emphasis on abstracting true taste sensations from olfactory, tactile and temperature sensations led Valentin (1853) back to the Aristotelian notion of the opposition between sweet and bitter; the hedonic extremes represented by these qualities may account for some of this emphasis.²² Scientists are still, however, searching for the basic tastes, and have recently expanded the standard “four tastes” – sweet, sour, bitter and salty – to include

umami, a savoury taste usually associated with meat or mushrooms in Japanese, a taste to which Baker and Livarda return in later chapters. These “basic tastes”, although they help to identify the nutritional and harmful properties of the things we ingest, are limited in modern taste research contexts to those chemicals that bring about a reaction in our taste-buds and their related neural receptors.²³

A key distinction between “ancient” and “modern” (that is, post-nineteenth-century) views of taste is the degree of multimodal integration they suggest it entails in the mouth. “Taste”, in a colloquial sense, is related to how we interact with food and drink on the tongue and the palate; we discuss the “taste” of a meal in uni-sensory terms, even though the experience itself involves a series of complex physical and cultural interactions. Scientifically, however, we now conceptualise taste as a series of chemical interactions between the receptors on the tongue, soft palate, and pharynx and the foods and drinks we consume. Recent chemosensory research aims to identify the key receptors for taste and how these receptors send signals to the brain. In addition to developing a better understanding of how the five basic taste substances attach to their receptors, research is also being conducted on trigeminal nerve sensitivity,²⁴ which promises a better understanding of the feelings of heating and cooling associated with, for example, chilli and mint. “Flavour”, by contrast, has become the favourite term for describing the intersection of aroma, taste and some tactile sensations. Tasting flavours has become a specialist skill – notably and most obviously in wine-tasting, but it is a multi-million-pound industry in food science and has implications in psychology too. Food industry experts and those who work on rheology (the study of how matter flows) have also coined the term “mouth-feel”, which involves the combined physical and chemical interactions that take place in the mouth, from initial perception on the palate to first bite, and from mastication to the act of swallowing.²⁵

The science of tasting, with its focus on nerve stimulation and the precise differentiation of experiences in the mouth, makes taste a disembodied physical and psychological phenomenon, with explanations that attempt to isolate the taste experience from the body as a whole. This volume is not limited by such strict distinctions, and instead takes a broader view of taste as the multimodal interaction between food, drink and the tongue, palate and digestive system. One important reason for doing so is because the Greeks and Romans themselves do not draw such sharp distinctions between the concepts

of taste and flavour. Greek and Latin taste terminology reveals some of the assumptions that underlie Greek and Roman conceptions of taste.²⁶ Ancient authors approach the act of tasting as not only a nuanced experience in itself, but also a process integrated with all that accompanies the experience: to taste was to engage in a complex relationship with the flavours and substance of the foods consumed in a cultural and environmental context with all its pleasures and dangers. Thus, taking a broad view avoids over-simplifying ancient notions of taste, while still exploring how the ancients themselves pick out qualities that are akin to modern “flavour” and “mouth-feel” distinctions.

The sense of taste, perhaps more than any other, suffers from isolation. Anyone with a stuffy nose can attest to the importance of smell in tasting what we eat. Without heating and cooling effects in the mouth, chilli would not elicit such aversion or appeal and mint would not be as satisfyingly fresh. Moreover, the texture of foods, the crunch of a potato crisp or the creaminess of custard, are often as important as the salty or sweet taste on the tongue. In this respect “taste” incorporates the other senses by making them complicit in the taste experience itself. Even sight is not immune; food is often, first, a feast for the eyes, as ancient poetry and modern research attest.²⁷ Eating, then, is multimodal. It involves more than the basic flavours; it also includes the tactile sensations of heat, cold and texture as well as olfactory sensations²⁸ in the orthonasal cavity as we chew and swallow. Such a multisensory approach to taste experience was central to the ancient understanding of the sense, as Aristotle makes clear.²⁹ Its very interdependence on the other senses makes taste special. Human physiology has not changed—the physical process of tasting is the same now as it was in Graeco–Roman antiquity—but our conception of it has changed in many ways. Thus, scholars are increasingly aware of the cultural contingency of the senses, and this informs how we approach the ancient senses. It is too easy to assume that because our physiology is the same, we can easily recreate the tastes of the ancient world.³⁰ But there is more to tasting than the physiological process, for it is steeped with cultural and personal significance.

Of tongues and palates

In order to better understand Greek and Roman ideas about taste in perceptual, cognitive and aesthetic contexts, we need to understand

first how they conceived of taste physiologically. Taste is a functional sense, requiring intimate interaction with its objects of perception, which enter the mouth, pass through the gullet and eventually become part of the perceiver.³¹ Because what is tasted is generally consumed, ancient theorising about the sense includes not just a physiological analysis of the tongue, but an analysis of flavour and its digestive effects as well, as Baker explores in [Chapter 8](#).

Unlike the divergent explanations of the sense modalities of sight, smell and even hearing in antiquity, the theoretical analysis of taste in Graeco-Roman philosophy and science is surprisingly uniform.³² The earliest theoretical analysis of the sense and organ of taste is found in a report of a physiological treatise by Alcmaeon of Croton (fl. 500–450 BCE).³³ He is among the early Greek theorists addressing questions of a philosophical, medical or scientific nature. Alcmaeon's theory distinguishes each of the senses, apart from touch: first hearing, followed by smelling, tasting and seeing. In each case he describes the proper qualities and functions of the sense organ,³⁴ including active and passive elements. Importantly, the brain is the anatomical and functional centre of human understanding, a theory Plato would borrow in his *Timaeus*.³⁵ The surviving reports of Alcmaeon's accounts of taste and sight are the most detailed.³⁶ For tasting, we are told:

By the tongue we distinguish (*krinō*) the flavours. For since it is warm and soft, the tongue melts [other things] with its heat; and it both receives and thoroughly transmits because it is uncompressed (*manotēs*) and yielding (*hapolotēs*).³⁷

The tongue is characterised by tactile qualities that perform particular functions, both in Alcmaeon and in the thinkers who come after him. Although Alcmaeon's account is not complete enough to determine how he thinks the tongue distinguishes flavours, later theorists give detailed accounts of the process. Alcmaeon's contemporary, Diogenes of Apollonia (fl. fifth century BCE), argues that the loose texture combines with all the ducts leading to it to make the tongue the best judge (*kritikōtaton*) of pleasure.³⁸ However, he also identifies a further function of the tongue, namely, as an indicator of illness.³⁹

Plato (428/7 or 424/3 to 348/7 BCE), whose *Timaeus* takes up key themes in the work of his predecessors, also identifies a twofold function for the tongue: that which is necessary and that which is good. His physiological account articulates the necessary functions of the tongue, which bear a close resemblance to those found in

Alcmaeon and Diogenes. For Plato, melting flavours results in the contraction and dilation of the tongue's veins; it is this alteration that constitutes flavour. In this respect, the tongue and mouth perform their function as a necessary inlet for nourishing food and drink. Plato also makes clear that the features of the mouth – the tongue and teeth – were also designed to give the capacity for speech. Thus, the mouth is also an outlet for the “fairest and best stream of speech which flows out and ministers to intelligence”.⁴⁰ Aristotle, too, identifies the function of the tongue as twofold, claiming that “nature uses the tongue both for taste and for articulate speech, of which taste is an essential to life (and consequently belongs to more species) and the power of expression is for the sake of living well”.⁴¹

Aristotle's detailed analysis of the organ, objects and process of taste both builds on the physiological accounts of his predecessors and departs from them. Aristotle likens the soft, spongy tongue to the hand or the foot, and attributes its ability to perceive tactile qualities like hard, soft, rough, smooth, hot and cold to its fleshiness. Thus, like the atomists, he suggests that taste is a form of touch.⁴² He also identifies the tip of the tongue as the seat of taste, since if something is placed on the flat surface of the tongue, the taste is less pronounced.⁴³ Moreover, the looseness of the tongue is related to the individual's ability to speak.⁴⁴ Aristotle thus recognises the multiple capacities of the tongue: it picks out flavours, senses tactile qualities and allows for language.⁴⁵ In his works on sensation, especially in *On the Soul* and *On the Senses*, Aristotle concentrates on flavours and the extent to which taste is integrated with the other sense modalities. Like the other senses, taste too is a case of perception through a medium. He writes that:

Since what is tasted is wet, the sense organ which perceives it must be not actually liquid but capable of liquefaction; for the sense of taste is affected by what is tasted, in so far as it is tasted. The sense organ of taste, then, is that which is capable of becoming liquefied, while preserving its identity, but is not itself liquid. This is proved by the fact that the tongue cannot taste when it is dry, nor when too wet; for this contact takes place with the first moisture, just as when a man having previously tasted a strong flavour meets another flavour; and so when a man is ill everything tastes bitter, because he is perceiving it with a tongue infected by a bitter taste.⁴⁶

Aristotle recognises an analogy between smells and tastes, yet he distinguishes them from one another, identifying taste as the stronger sense, since it is better able to discriminate its objects of perception.

Finally, we turn to the famous medical authority Galen, whose work on anatomy in the second century CE represents a radical departure from the early examples of taste physiology we have so far explored. The most striking and detailed analysis of the tongue comes from the later books of Galen's *Anatomical Procedures*. This text survives only in an Arabic translation, and is a relative newcomer to the Galenic corpus as we have it.⁴⁷ Three chapters of the work are devoted to the tongue, its muscles, glands, arteries and nerves. Galen's account goes beyond the tongue's spongy fleshiness; he identifies the nerves responsible for the tongue's voluntary movement and distinguishes these from the so-called "soft" nerves, which he identifies as responsible for sensation. He writes:

For it is the "soft" nerve which passes by the bone of the mandible and goes to the tongue which, coming from the brain, conveys sense-impressions of taste to it [and does so] without distributing itself into a single muscle, or in the substance of the tongue; rather is it distributed to the covering of the tongue which envelops it completely on its surface. This covering is firmly united with the one which clothes [lines] the whole of the oral cavity uniformly as far as the *fauces*.⁴⁸

Galen's identification of the nerves responsible for the tongue's movement and sensation is striking. He is, of course, building on the anatomical work of the Hellenistic medical specialists, Herophilus and Erasistratus, but his analysis, particularly of the nerves, goes beyond that of his Alexandrian predecessors, particularly in his identification of the glossopharyngeal nerve. Galen identifies the extent to which the sensory nerves pervade the surface of the tongue, and he is particularly interested in how the proportion of sensory nerves to the covering of the tongue is larger than one would expect, given the tongue's size.

Galen also has a keen interest in the cause of the tongue's sensory capacity.⁴⁹ In *On Method in Medicine* he chastises adherents of the Methodist school of medicine who make the taste function (*energeia*) of the tongue reliant upon only one pair of the opposites, heat or cold, dryness or moisture or a balance of the dilation and contraction of the pores.⁵⁰

Galen's insight, that the covering of the tongue was continuous with the covering of the mouth, the pharynx and the stomach lining is indicative of the medical approach to flavour.⁵¹ It suggests that taste is a central component in healing and, as Totelin and Baker explore in this volume, "tasting" in the ancient medical tradition was not limited to the mouth, or indeed to a single sensation. Rather, the powers of the flavours are far-reaching and felt throughout the body, in both the concoction or digestion of food and through the absorption of drugs.

The imagery of taste

We have already briefly explored the functional aspects of taste, which will be picked up to a greater extent in later chapters, but the role of the tongue as arbiter or judge in Alcmaeon and Diogenes of Apollonia, by the beginning of the Hellenistic period had been superseded by a hierarchy of the senses. As we saw in the volume's opening epigraph, it was assumed that the sense of taste, as the most slavish of the senses, fed only the base pleasures associated with desire, lust, greed and sensuality. Aristotle, for example, asserts that taste and touch are the most "slavish and bestial" of the senses, with which self-control and wantonness are concerned. He distinguishes between two types of alimentary overindulgence: that of consumption and that of taste. Encouraging his readers to attain pleasure from the right object, he turns to food to make his point: "gluttons pray not for a long tongue, but for the long gullet of a crane".⁵² Here the object of reproof is not the pleasure of taste on the tongue, but rather an inappropriate attitude to consumption, which he illustrates with examples from the animal world – dogs delighting in the scent of hares or lions in the sights and sounds of goats and oxen.⁵³ However, Aristotle warns his readers against overindulgence in tastes as well, arguing that the "mean" (the ideal midpoint) for nutrition, being linked with sweetness, is closer to the extreme of deficiency than excess.⁵⁴ Without the right amount and type of food, health and strength diminish in the short term and in the long term deficiency leads to death. Thus, Aristotle advises his reader to seek the appropriate amount of food that is good for each individual, since the wrestler requires more food than you or me.⁵⁵ So far as the pleasures of taste are concerned, they differ for man and animal, since humans not only seek what is healthy and avoid what is deleterious, but also desire taste sensations like an epicure. However, for Aristotle, even the

most refined gustatory sensation remains a pleasure of the sense and fails to lead to any higher insights or cognitive achievements.⁵⁶ Philo, as we have seen, echoes Aristotle's sentiment that taste, alongside touch, is the most slavish of the senses. So do the early Christian fathers, as Caseau reveals in [Chapter 13](#), discussing the pleasures and dangers of taste in early and late antique Christianity.

Eating satisfies our most basic, material needs through an act that may be seen as both desirous and aggressive, and for this reason it is invested with great significance, both in social life and literature. The act of eating has both selfish and yet unifying tendencies, which makes it strikingly ambivalent, as Mikhail Bakhtin makes clear.⁵⁷ Those in antiquity who would seek to elevate the pleasures of the stomach were not helped by observations that animals shared in the sense of taste.⁵⁸ Comic writers take great pleasure in poking fun at the dining habits of abstemious philosophers;⁵⁹ nonetheless Cicero, in the first century BCE, puts into the mouth of his Stoic philosopher Balbus the view that even the senses of taste, smell and touch were worthy of praise.⁶⁰ Epicurus goes so far as to claim that the pleasures of the stomach are among those that form the foundation of all good.⁶¹ In a fragment of his *On the Goal of Life* (*Peri telous*), Epicurus writes:

οὐδὲ γὰρ ἔγωγε ἔχω τί νοήσω τάγαθὸν ἀφαιρῶν μὲν τὰς διὰ
χυλῶν ἡδονάς, ἀφαιρῶν δὲ τὰς δι' ἀφροδισίων ἀφαιρῶν δὲ τὰς
δι' ἀκροαμάτων, ἀφαιρῶν δὲ καὶ τὰς διὰ μορφῆσκατ' ὅψιν
ἡδείας κινήσεις.

Indeed, I do not know how I may conceive of the good, were I to exclude the pleasures of taste, sex, sound, and for sight, the pleasing movements of the bodily form.⁶²

In making this claim, Epicurus does not follow the Cyrenaic hedonists in asserting an inverted hierarchy of pleasures, with those of the body being marked out as more intense than those of the mind. Rather, he sets about redefining the meaning of pleasure, making it clear that it is not the continuous indulgence in “drinking and parties or pederasty or womanizing or the enjoyment of fish and other dishes of an expensive table”,⁶³ but rather, that the absence of hunger, thirst, cold – in a word, pain – is pleasurable. Indeed, a person free of these pains would, as he says, rival Zeus in happiness.⁶⁴ Once hunger has been sated, the body gains no further *pleasure* from eating, but only a *variation* in the pleasure.⁶⁵ This variation, too, has a place in Epicurus' philosophy. Although bread and water is enough to satisfy the pangs

of hunger and thirst, our experience of a varied diet provides us with the basis for later contemplation, when such mental pleasures are needed to balance out unavoidable pains we may suffer. Epicurus' philosophical approach to pleasure suggests a deep awareness of the intricacies of the debates found in Plato, Aristotle and their successors, and it is perhaps in response to an over-reliance on the separation of body from mind in their works that he makes his claim about the pleasures of taste as the foundation of happiness and the good. Epicurus himself was not a stranger to the pains of poor digestion⁶⁶ and as Gosling and Taylor point out, hunger and thirst as well as overindulgence undermine concentration and rational thought.⁶⁷

Such mediated approaches to the pleasures of the belly are shared by Epicurus' predecessors and successors, but those who overindulge are common subjects of mockery in the Graeco-Roman world, where insatiable eaters and over-stuffed gluttons are ripe for comic exploitation.⁶⁸ The "patron saint" of such men is none other than the voracious Heracles, who transformed Greek diet by introducing beef to the menu.⁶⁹ Heracles is overindulgent on the comic stage, amid a larger cast of gluttons and parasites.⁷⁰ The comic actors' bodies were themselves transformed by the padding of fat hips, thighs and bellies, but the belly incorporates the man in ancient metaphor as well.⁷¹ Aristophanes, the fifth-century BCE comic playwright, plays on the connection between mouths and bellies in the *Birds*, where the race of *englottogastores* ("tongue bellies"), who gather fruit with their tongues, are vilified.⁷² Plutarch, six centuries later, jokes about the crab-like parasite as "body all belly; eyes looking everywhere; a beast that creeps on its teeth",⁷³ turning riddle into satire. The stomach and its toothy extensions subsume body and limb, even going so far as to control the all-seeing eye. The Roman Horace, too, speaks of the glutton belly, which deadens the finely tuned tongue of the gourmand.⁷⁴ In these humorous metaphors we see a recurrent ancient view of the gustatory organs as a single conjoined system. The mouth, teeth and tongue are connected to the stomach through the gullet, and all can act as metonymy for the glutton and the parasite.

The mouthy parasite is a stock character in Greek and Roman comedy and beyond, and although ruled by his hunger and poverty, is also often portrayed as a connoisseur who enjoys fine foods.⁷⁵ For example, Lucian, in his *On the Parasite* of the second century CE, tells how this character "understood what was good and bad in food and had busied himself with delicacies",⁷⁶ but it is his poverty, his lack of access to a well-laid table, and his witty repartee that usually

distinguish him from the mere glutton. In this way, the parasite represents the mouth *par excellence*, not only for the refinement of his palate, but also for the sumptuousness of his flattery.⁷⁷

The Greek and Roman “tongue”, while operating as the organ of taste, was also the means of linguistic expression. Speech is as dependent on the physiology of the tongue as tasting is, and for some, intervention is needed to free a tongue too fixed in the mouth. Indeed, both Aristotle and Galen highlight surgical procedures that could be used to “loosen” tongue-tie (*agkulōsis*).⁷⁸ Moreover, eating and speaking are intimately linked from the very beginning of Western literature. In the famous first appearance of the potage (*kukeiōn*) of onion, barley, grated goat’s cheese and Pramnian wine, in the *Iliad*, the drink quenches the men’s thirst. However, what pleases them (*terpō*) is not the drink going in, but rather the talk (*muthos*) coming out.⁷⁹ Moreover, just as one’s eating habits serve to mark out cultural distinctions among people,⁸⁰ speech too served to delineate cultural identity, to separate the barbarian from the civilised Greek.⁸¹ The girls of Delos ritually imitate the clattering sounds of barbarian tongues, and elsewhere non-Greek speech is likened to the sounds of pigs or frogs, bats, horses, swallows and cicadas.⁸² Sophocles (*Trachiniae* 1006) goes so far as to distinguish Hellas from the “land without a tongue” (*aglossos gaia*).

The ancients devoted a great deal of energy – in the form of rhetorical study and practice – to establishing the best way to train the tongue. Achilles is tutored in the art of fine speech so that he can be both a speaker (*rhētōr*) of words and a doer of deeds.⁸³ He is not alone among the heroes of Greek epic in putting into practice the art of effective speech. Nestor is famous for his clear and sweet voice, but clarity is not enough to elevate Thersites’ speech, which is unmeasured and disorderly (*akosma*).⁸⁴ His reckless speech is a mark of his lack of training and his aim is only to utter abuse and get a laugh. Teeth and speech are often linked in early Greek metaphors, where they act as a cage-like barrier to restrain reckless speech (*Iliad*. 4.350, 14.83). Likewise the door-less tongue incapable of restraining the voice, commonly exemplifies poor judgement.⁸⁵ Speech, then, is as important a marker of social rank as eating.

Possessing rhetorical skill allows one to assert dominance in the social and political sphere, whether in the law courts or in the marketplace.⁸⁶ Such learning is parodied on the comic stage, most famously in the “tongue-wrestling” (*glottostrophein*) of Strepsiades in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*. Plato, in particular, downplays the need for

rhetorical training of the kind that Protagoras, Gorgias and Hippias offered, preferring the philosophical connoisseur, as Rudolph explores in [Chapter 2](#). Thus, while eating brings the world to the perceiver, speaking brings the subject to and situates her within the world.

As the organ of speech as well as taste, the tongue not only plays a role in internalising the external world, but also in externalising the internal world.⁸⁷ The dichotomy between rhetoric and *parrhesia* is marked in Plato's *Gorgias*, where Callicles is praised by Socrates for his knowledge, goodwill and *parrhesia*.⁸⁸ Such frankness, Socrates suggests, puts the dialogue on course towards the truth, but Callicles falls short when he abandons his frank speech regarding justice when it comes to discussions of masculinity. At this point, Socrates recalls Callicles' earlier *parrhesia*. He says "you began by speaking frankly to me, it's only just that you should go on saying what you think" (521a). Thus, we see that the tongue both reveals and conceals the individual; speech patterns and eating habits reveal one's nature, culture and class.

The female voice, by contrast, is not trained for high-flown rhetoric, but tied closely to the body. Medusa and her Gorgon sisters, for all the scholarship that fixates on the gaze, also represent the tensions which surround the female voice and the body. This is most clearly seen in Pindar's *Pythian* 12, where the primary features of the Gorgons are linked not to a moment of seeing, but to a moment of vocalising.⁸⁹ Even in the highly visualized depictions of Medusa in Augustan literature, it is her *os* – her face, or literally "mouth" – in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that not only silences the speech of Perseus' enemies, but even overpowers the supposedly protective depiction of the Nile's seven mouths on Nileus' shield.⁹⁰ In the visual arts, too, the magnified tongue, teeth and lips of the figures serve as a visual marker of the Gorgon's etymological link to the Indo-European root *garj*, meaning shout, cry or shriek. Visual representations of Medusa, the Gorgons and the Gorgoneion (mask-like face), like those we find in Archaic Greek or Etruscan art, exaggerate the sensory organs, so that even when separated from a body, the face itself signals the visceral and sensory nature of the figure.⁹¹ Some scholars associate the Gorgoneion's distended sensory features – particularly the oversized teeth and tongue – with those of a raging animal, highlighting the horrific and non-human aspects of this first mortal monster,⁹² and perhaps even suggesting the link between the senses and the bestial nature seen in Aristotle. According to Freud, it is the mouth and its snaky frame, in particular, which serve to sexualise the figure of

Medusa, whose startling powers of life and death have been read as a threat to masculine authority.⁹³ Thus, quite apart from their nourishing and oratorical function, the mouth – teeth, tongue and lips – also plays one further essential role in mediating the relationship between the self and the other, since these oral features are ripe for sexualised representation.

Countless metaphors align eating and sexual intercourse, in both Greek and Roman literature.⁹⁴ One of the most striking is that of Lucretius in the finale of book 4 of his *On the Nature of Things* (*De rerum natura*).

For indeed, at the very moment of possession, the hot passion of lovers fluctuates with uncertain wanderings and they are undecided what to enjoy first with eyes and hands. They tightly press what they have sought and cause bodily pain, and often drive their teeth into little lips and give crushing kisses, because the pleasure is not pure and there are goads underneath which prod them to hurt the very thing, whatever it is, from which those <torments> of frenzy spring. But Venus gently breaks the force of the penalties in the midst of love and the intermingling of soothing pleasure reins back the bites.⁹⁵

The commingling of sensory stimulus here is rich; in a confused rush eyes, hands and teeth rake the body of the other in an act of passion that has become aggression. The senses author both pleasure and pain; mediating and modifying the lover's encounter with the beloved.⁹⁶ Lucretius' alliance of eyes, hands and mouth is striking, since eyes are the ancient sense *par excellence* while the organ of touch, for Epicureans, is the most basic.⁹⁷ The confusion of the mouth differs strikingly from that of the other senses. Whereas eyes and hands are overwhelmed by choice, the mouth turns the beloved into an object of its violent consumption.⁹⁸ That the act of eating is itself a violent destruction would be eloquently expressed again a generation later in the speech that Ovid attributes to Pythagoras,⁹⁹ but Lucretius goes one step further, implying that sexual desire is itself a kind of failed cannibalism in which the lover attempts to consume the object of his desire in order to avoid being consumed by passion himself.¹⁰⁰

Lucretius makes the connection between the act of consumption and consummation a few lines later:

[T]hey greedily attach the body and join the mouth's salivas and

draw deep breaths while pressing mouth with teeth – in vain, since they cannot scrape off anything from there or enter in and merge into the other body with their whole body; for sometimes they seem to want and struggle to do so: with such desire do they cling in the bonds of Venus, while their limbs turn liquid, loosened by the force of pleasure.¹⁰¹

Here the implications of the metaphorical feast are twofold. On the one hand the violent aggression of the kisses – pressing mouth (or kisses) with teeth – is likened to the act of scraping flesh off bone. But the violent act is reformulated into the failed attempt to internalize the beloved. The struggle to bring into the mouth and thereby merge one body with another, is ultimately doomed to failure. Again, however, that moment of attempted incorporation is forestalled by pleasure, which loosens and liquefies the limbs. Perhaps we can see here in the liquefying of the limbs a connection with the bodies being made vulnerable to tasting (since liquid carries flavour) just at the moment when the mouth no longer has the strength to taste.

Even fictional bodies are not immune to the vulnerabilities of sexualised tasting, as Telò makes clear in [Chapter 4](#), where separation and unification transform Homeric bodies for the delectation of Matro's audience. But sexualised metaphors of taste can also be read in other ways, as Meredith Warren explores here in her treatment of the Persephone myth as an act of divine tasting in ancient religious contexts. Although the tongue, for the ancients, is a functional organ mediating our gustatory experience, it is also the marker of social, cultural and personal identity that mediates transformative experiences between individuals and the world;¹⁰² it is these themes that *Taste and the Ancient Senses* aims to explore.

A tasting menu

The multivalent relationships between the sense of taste, food and the act of eating are too complex to be considered from any single perspective. This volume, like the others in the “Senses in Antiquity” series, seeks to initiate new conversations – between the contributors, classicists and the wider cross-disciplinary field of sensory studies – by bringing different disciplinary approaches to the ancient sensory table. The volume itself follows a broadly chronological sequence from the Archaic period through to the first millennium CE. Chapters progress in such a way that a reader may travel the various byways from

Greece to Rome. Such an approach to the material is deliberate because it avoids privileging a theoretical, literary or material mode of exploring taste over the others. Unfortunately, the nature of our evidence, and particularly the scarcity of floral and faunal remains in the early Greek archaeological record, hinders complete integration of the material and literary remains. Additionally, a chronological approach to our sources reflects the extent to which technical, literal and metaphorical approaches to the senses are interwoven in the ancient record. Consequently, our investigation of Graeco-Roman taste moves between a range of interpretative approaches. The values and meanings of taste are revealed through cultural practices and habits which are accessible to us through the historical, literary and material record. And it is in these contexts that the chapters in this volume examine the functions, social values and symbolism that surround the tastes the Greeks and Romans embrace and reject. The reader is also, of course, invited to pick her own way through the menu on offer; cross-references in the footnotes throughout should help satisfy any particular desires.

The volume opens with Sarah Hitch's exploration of the interplay between consumption and taste in Homer, a central theme that pervades the collection as a whole. An analysis of food and dining in Homer reveals an author more interested in the visual and auditory pleasures of such experiences than in their taste, but when it comes to action on the battlefield or in the poetic arena, taste metaphors come to the fore, where they are used to highlight the danger and individual achievement that such contests demand. Hitch then turns to the afterlife of these metaphors, exploring their transformations, first in the hands of the lyric and dramatic poets of the fifth century BCE, and finally on Aristophanes' comic stage, where tastes speak a language all their own.

The next two contributions turn to the technical literature of Greek philosophy and medicine in order to explore the extent to which taste was theorised by the ancients themselves. In [Chapter 2](#), Kelli Rudolph examines how ancient Greek philosophers from an early period utilise taste as a distinctive and individualised sensation, which nonetheless provides us with knowledge about the world. Xenophanes inaugurates this approach, which is put to epistemological use in the early classical and Hellenistic debate concerning the exact nature of the flavours in Plato, Democritus and his Epicurean successors. For these authors, disagreement over tastes serves as a paradigm for subjective relativity that resists the imposition of standards; such connotations

can also be found in Plato's metaphorical use of taste. Laurence Totelin's "Tastes in ancient botany, medicine and science: bitter herbs and sweet honey" also begins with the juxtaposition of metaphor and sensation. She explores how botanical and medical authors, when explaining their experience of unique or rare tastes, turn to a limited set of common yet distinctive flavours to describe their experience. In so doing, these authors set out to determine the capacities of the natural substances they encounter, and the causal links that exist between a substance's flavour and its ability to affect the body. While sweet and bitter populate opposite ends of the literal taste spectrum, Totelin illustrates how these tastes come to symbolise cultivation and wilderness, feminine and masculine, and nutritive and medicative, both in the technical prose literature of ancient medicine, philosophy and science and also in Roman poetic discourse.

The theoretical concerns of [Chapter 2](#) and [Chapter 3](#) provide just one way into ancient conceptions of taste, but as these chapters suggest, the metaphorical life of taste is equally rich in ancient literature. In "Tastes of Homer: Matro's gastroaesthetic tour through epic", Mario Telò provides a case study for how playing with metaphor transforms tradition in this fourth-century BCE parody of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Here, our attention is drawn not to the transformation of Homeric metaphor, but to the metamorphosis of the characters themselves. By appropriating Homeric sounds, meaning and contexts and recombining them with ancient psychophysical identities, literary biography and symbolic valences, Matro presents Homeric heroes, heroines and gods in alimentary guise. Telò's close analysis of three of Matro's characters – doughy Nausicaa, cuttlefish Thetis and tuna-headed Ajax – illustrates how the idea of taste as a sensual, even erotic experience brings the reader into contact with the fictional Homeric bodies. However, Telò also reveals that behind many of Matro's sensationalised depictions of Homeric figures lies the equally powerful metaphors of nourishment and incorporation. In the end, Telò reveals how fragmentation and softening literally and figuratively transform Homer's heroes and Matro's own audience in a para-epic *tour de force*. Likewise, in [Chapter 5](#), Emily Gowers explores metaphors of taste in Roman literature, where the immediacy and physicality of literal taste are juxtaposed with metaphorical expressions of memory and emotion, as well as moments of literal, mythic and spiritual nourishment, incorporation and transformation. Gowers illustrates how poetry's manipulation of sweet, salty and sharp flavours informs literary-critical vocabulary, while also highlighting

taste's role in the synaesthetic milieu of cultural criticism. Roman authors also exploit the conceptual relation between *sapor* (flavour) and *sapientia* (wisdom) in their attempts to capture and express varying species of exploration. Graeco-Roman integration of taste and metaphor is seen in a broader context in Meredith Warren's "Tastes from beyond: Persephone's pomegranate and otherworldly consumption in antiquity", which looks at the integral role consumption and taste metaphors play in the transformative experience of tasting food from another realm in the Greek, Roman and Jewish traditions. In the case of the already divine Persephone, this results in a shift in her identity from daughter to wife, but for the mortal tasters in biblical and pseudepigraphic contexts, taste not only transports them beyond the boundary of this world, it also allows them access to the knowledge of the divine. Picking up on themes explored in [Chapter 2](#), Warren shows how taste plays a role in mediating the human relation to the divine in literary contexts.

In [Chapter 7](#) and [Chapter 8](#), devoted to taste and ancient diet, Laura Banducci and Patricia Baker bring together the material and literary remains of antiquity to explore the role of cultural tastes and medical expectations regarding the balance of flavours in shaping the diet of ancient Romans. In "Tastes of Roman Italy: early Roman expansion and taste articulation", Banducci explores the tastes associated with ancient Roman cuisine through the lens of the developing notion of Roman identity. By bringing literary and material evidence to bear on the question of taste preferences and hybridisation during Roman expansion, she suggests that what has traditionally been considered a "Roman" diet tells us as much about the rich resources of the Italian peninsula as it does about the taste preferences of the Romans themselves. The Roman adaptation of "foreign"-style dishes and ingredients to their native Italian cuisine may initiate change in Roman cuisine, but what does not change is the Roman interest in an ingredient's *terroir*, its origin and methods of production and preparation. It is these alimentary elements that become part of the standard discourse on food in the Empire. Baker, similarly, is interested in ancient food discourse in relation to what people actually ate.¹⁰³ A comparison of Greek and Roman medical dietary advice with the remains of foodstuffs and epigraphic data in Herculaneum and Pompeii suggests that the local consumption patterns are in line with ancient medical dietary standards for health. In order to better understand whether this coherence between the material evidence and the medical advice is a result of dispersed

medical knowledge, Baker then explores the extent to which the educated elite – represented by Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophists* and Apicius – share in the knowledge of the complex and multisensory balancing of flavours and their powers found in medical texts. Baker concludes that although the general theories discussed by these educated laymen conform to some medical advice, the complex and at times contradictory nature of the latter would make it difficult for anyone to follow the dietary regimen to the letter. Partly, this is because the constitution of an individual, his place of residence and the time of year affect the prescribed diet as well. Thus, Baker gives us a taste of how physicians and the public understood dietary health in the ancient world.

The next three contributions, by Michael MacKinnon, Alexandra Livarda and Thibaut Boulay, examine the taste of particular foodstuffs: meat, plants and wine, respectively. MacKinnon explores the vast array of faunal remains from sites in Greece and Italy in order to highlight the multi-dimensional interplay between nature and culture in the context of the “taste” of meat. He goes beyond taste in the mouth, picking up on themes found in Banducci and Baker, to examine the biological, environmental and cultural processes that are brought to bear in the rearing and preparation of meat. He examines how animal husbandry and human diets arise from the intermingling of ecological and cultural concerns while also exploring how the taste of meat itself invokes a variety of somatosensory experiences, particularly in the case of Roman consumption of pork. Livarda too highlights the way that tastes evolve in a particular region by providing an analysis of archaeobotanical remains from sites in the northwestern provinces of the Roman empire over a four-century period. She explores the driving forces for these changes, which include socio-economic drivers like trade and the military, but also socio-cultural drivers, including religious affiliations, opinions about health and the desire for familiarity. In this respect, her work further explores larger themes, including the role of identity in creating and consolidating taste preferences. Thibaut Boulay explores the inter-sensory aspects of wine-tasting in ancient Greek by looking at Galen’s account of how one should taste wine. He draws out how colour, harmony, flavour and texture play a role in the understanding and development of taste in relation to wine, suggesting that taste terminology in antiquity is able to capture some of the same complexities that we expect from modern tasting practice. In the process, he extends the discussion of *terroir* and agricultural

production highlighted in the previous chapters, and begins an exploration of taste terminology and categorisation which will be picked up by Paulas in [Chapter 12](#).

Building on how taste in antiquity was developed and harnessed, John Paulas looks to later technical writers to explore how Imperial Roman authors approach the categorisation of flavour as an intellectual endeavour in the first three centuries CE. Drawing on a fascinating range of philosophy, natural history, medicine and lexicography, he reveals that speculations about the physical sense of taste and the existence of flavour phenomena in the natural world exemplify the Roman imperial period's intellectual and cultural interest in wonder and paradox.

Béatrice Caseau rounds out the volume with a wide-ranging survey of taste in early Christianity. She explores how the early church incorporates, rejects and ultimately transforms Jewish dietary preferences in the multicultural context of an ever-expanding Christian community, where the concept of obedience takes on new forms. The profound cultural changes that arise in early Christianity were codified in the late antique period. As Christianity became more normative, control over the enjoyment of tasting was a moral, not merely a dietary, concern. This forms the basis for a growing asceticism among cloistered and lay Christian communities. Finally, turning to the taste experience itself, Caseau explores the way taste mediates relationships between individuals and the divine in the Eucharist, where the literal taste of the body and blood of Christ bestows spiritual nourishment to believers.

This introduction has given a taste of the key volume themes and one possible way of reading it. Although each chapter was commissioned and written as a stand-alone study of taste in antiquity, we have nonetheless made a concerted effort to enter into dialogue with one another and with the other volumes in the “Senses in Antiquity” series. Special thanks are due to all of the contributors, who took this as an opportunity to stretch the boundaries of their own knowledge and their disciplinary modes of thinking; tastes are difficult to pin down. The results will, of course, speak for themselves, but we hope that the conversation started by this book will expand the disciplines of archaeology, literature and philosophy, enabling us to understand the various ways that taste and flavour were perceived in the ancient world. The present volume aims only to whet the reader's appetite by selectively highlighting aspects of taste that pervade the rituals, languages, cultures and materials of the ancient world. In

these contexts, taste is loaded with a significance extending far beyond the pleasure it provides.

- 1 On Philo's Platonic and Stoic influence see Reydamas-Schils (2008). All references to Philo cited from Colson (1929–62).
- 2 Philo, *On the Confusion of the Tongue* (*De confusione linguarum*) 90, 194.
- 3 See Korsmeyer (1999: 11–37, 54–63).
- 4 Kant ([1798] 1996: 40–8, 141–3).
- 5 Scientific studies on sugar and fat consumption make clear the human inclination towards these tastes. See McLaughlin & Margolskee (1994); Drewnowski (1989, 1991, 1997); Meiselman & MacFie (1996).
- 6 See also Philo, *On Abraham* (*De Abrahamo*) 21.149–50, 41.236–41, *On Dreams* (*De somniis*) 7.48–51, *On Agriculture* (*De agricultura*) 36–8, *The Contemplative Life* (*De vita contemplativa*) 45–6. These themes are explored in greater detail in [Chapter 5](#) (Gowers) and [Chapter 12](#) (Paulas) in this volume.
- 7 Scholarship in sensory studies is growing in the humanities and social sciences. The contributions to the journals *Senses and Society* and the *Journal of Sensory Studies* are indicative. See also Berg's "Sensory Formations" series, including Howes (2005) and Korsmeyer (2005). See also Korsmeyer (1999); M. M. Smith (2007, 2014); Alhoff & Monroe (2007). Developments in art history are also notable; see Halsall (2004) and Jones (2006).
- 8 See Mead & Métraux (1957); Huizinga ([1919] 1996) and Febvre ([1942] 1982). In literary studies, see the influential work of Bakhtin ([1965] 1968) and Henisch (1976).
- 9 Lévi-Strauss ([1964] 1970: 31). This adaptation of Saussure's structural linguistics marks a turning point in the historical and anthropological studies of the senses. See Howes (2003) and Classen (2001) for further details on sensory studies in early anthropological and historical scholarship.
- 10 Barthes ([1961] 2008: 29–30). He uses the example of the succulence, brightness and moisture signified by the ancient Greek γάρος, used of honey and wine alike. The sweetness of honey is a recurring theme in the study of taste, both in this volume and elsewhere.
- 11 Bourdieu ([1979] 1984: 79). For Bourdieu, socio-economic class distinctions determine aesthetic taste by forming and reinforcing social distinctions that separate the upper from the lower classes. He argues that "the strongest and most indelible mark of infant learning" is related to the tastes of food, and that meals are key indicators of class identity.
- 12 See Squire (2015: 8–19) on the centrality of vision for Graeco-Roman theories of sensation.
- 13 Forster & Ranum (1979), which is both historical and literary in scope, offers a collection of key articles from the *Annales*. The French historian Alain Corbin's work has been very influential in the field of sensory studies: *The Foul and the Fragrant* ([1982] 1986) explores the social history of smell in nineteenth-century France and his *Village Bells: Sounds and Meanings in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside* ([1994] 1998) does the same for sound. See also Smith & Christian (1984); Spary (2012).
- 14 Spices: Schivelbusch (1992); Cooke & Harrison (2007); Dalby (2002b). Salt: Kurlansky (2002); Moinier & Weller (2015). Chocolate: Off (2006). Cf. Curtis (1991); Grainger (1997).
- 15 See the recent work of Teughels & Scholliers (2015); Bégin (2016). Cf. M. M. Smith (2007, 2014); Woolgar (2006).
- 16 Deonna & Renard (1961); Brothwell & Brothwell (1998); Detienne & Vernant

- ([1979] 1989); Revel ([1979] 1982) André (1981); Dosi & Schnell (1984); Garnsey (1988, 1999); Dalby (1996, 2002a, 2003); Alcock (2001); Grocock & Grainger (2006); Wilkins & Hill (2006). Cf. Carcopino ([1938] 2003).
- 17Dunbabin (2003); Davidson (1997); Wilkins (2000). See also Bober (1999).
- 18See Cave (1979); Edmunds (1980); Brown (1985); Bevan (1988); Marin ([1986] 1989); Jeanneret ([1987] 1991) and more recently Gigante (2005). In classical studies in particular, see e.g. McKinlay (1946, 1947); Commager (1957); Seltman (1957); Bramble (1974).
- 19Gowers (1993). See also Silk (2003).
- 20Literary studies related to food, dining and consumption abound. In addition to those listed above, see Davies (1997); Lada-Richards (1999: 123–58); Gold & Donahue (2005); Catrein (2003).
- 21This is an old view. Menestor, a Pythagorean from Sybaris (Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras* 267), held that flavours were infinite, according to Theophrastus (*Causes of Plants* 6.3.5).
- 22It is during the nineteenth century that much of the earlier confusion over the anatomy of the taste sense was resolved, partially as the result of insights from related scientific fields, which led to essential developments in human physiology. Le Cat (*A Physical Essay on the Senses* ([1742] 1750: 15–23)) anticipates Brillat-Savarin's ([1825] 1994) insight that the tongue alone is not responsible for taste, citing the cases of two children who were able to taste, despite the loss of their tongues (one born without a tongue, the other who lost his tongue through gangrene from smallpox). An account of this work can be found in Carterette and Freidman (1978: 3–18), Beidler (1984) and Jütte (2014).
- 23For more on the interrelated notions of taste, gustation and flavour, see Livarda's discussion in [Chapter 10](#).
- 24The trigeminal nerve is the fifth cranial nerve, serving the eye, nose and mouth; it is responsible for feelings of heat and cool when eating mustard or eucalyptus.
- 25Breslin (2013). See Meilgaard *et al.* (1979) for the beer industry standardised terminology of mouth-feel and taste terms. See Noble *et al.* (1987) for the wine aroma terminology and Gawel *et al.* (2000) for wine industry terminology for mouth-feel.
- 26Greek uses χυμός (*chumos*) or χυλός (*chulos*) and γεῦσις (*geusis*) to signify flavour. The first two terms literally mean “juice”, highlighting the liquidity of flavour; they derive ultimately from the Proto-Indo-European root **ǵheu-* that signifies (and is etymologically linked to the English) to “gush”. Cf. *LSJ*, s.v. ὀπός, which properly refers to “plant sap”. For the distinction between liquid, sap and flavour see Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants (Historia plantarum)* 9.1.1–2, 8.1. For liquid as tasteable see Aristotle, *On the Soul (De anima)* 422a17–19; cf. 414b11–14 where χυμός is a kind of seasoning. The third term derives from γεύομαι (*geuomai*, Latin *gusto*), which means “to taste” or “to enjoy”, providing not only the hedonic connection so often associated with taste, but also highlighting the activity of consumption itself. γεῦσις derives from the Proto-Indo-European root **ǵheus*, as does the English “choose”. On the relation between these concepts, see Aristotle, *On the Soul* 426a14–15, where the faculty of taste is called tasting (γεῦσις) but the actuality (*energeia*) of χυμός is nameless; cf. *Physics* 245a9, where χυμός is “together with” the sense of taste. Latin also employs two terms for taste. Pliny (*Natural History (Historia naturalis)* 15.106.1–2) argues that juices (*suci*) have thirteen common types of tastes (*saporum*), which suggests a distinction between the carriers of flavours (*sucus*), and the act of tasting itself (*sapor*). See Paulas ([Chapter 12](#)). Etymologically

sucus links taste with “juice” while *sapor*, “taste” is linked primarily to perception itself. Two Latin verbs demarcate taste experiences: *sapio* is etymologically linked with perception, and thus it means both “to taste” and “to be wise”; whereas *gusto* is more closely linked with hedonic experience. The link between *sapor* (flavour) and *sapientia* (wisdom), although striking, is never exploited as fully as wisdom’s connection with vision. See Gowers (Chapter 5). *Sucus* is linked etymologically with the Greek ὕδωρ, which is the more general term for liquid and often distinguished from the specifically flavour-carrying χυλός/χυμός.

- 27 See Hitch (Chapter 1) for Homeric feasts for the eyes.
- 28 Bradley (2015) provides an important study of smell and the senses in antiquity.
- 29 Aristotle, *On the Soul* 423a17–25. On taste and smell see Aristotle, *On the Senses* (*De sensu*) 440b28–441a3, 442b26–443a21, 443b9–16. However, when describing moderation as a characteristic inculcated in individuals by habit and reason, Aristotle says the “lower” senses are prone to overindulgence, but vision and hearing do not suffer the same weakness; see Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* 1230b31–1231a1 and *Nicomachean Ethics* 1118a2–6. Cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 47d.
- 30 Numerous cookbooks and websites are devoted to recreating ancient cuisine, but few of them take the time to question the extent to which taste, with all of its cultural and personal attachments, can be reconstructed. Dalby & Grainger (1996) is an exception.
- 31 For the distinction between self-nutrition and sensation see Aristotle, *On the Soul* 412b1, 413a20–b1. For taste and its categorisation among the edible tangibles see *On the Soul* 414a5–15, which also highlights the relation between taste/touch and desire. See Aristotle, *History of Animals* 492b27–493a1 for a general description of the digestive system.
- 32 On smell, see Totelin (2015a) in Bradley (2015). On sight, see Nightingale (2015) in Squire (2015) and Rudolph (2011, 2012, 2015). On hearing, see Beare ([1906] 1992) and Butler & Nooter (forthcoming) and on touch see Purves (forthcoming).
- 33 See Perilli (2001); Laks (1999); Mansfeld (1975, 2013); Gemelli-Marciano (2007: 18–22). Zhmud (2012: 366) argues that the physiological interests of the fifth-century pluralists were largely due to Alcmaeon’s influence.
- 34 Theophrastus, *On the Senses* (*De sensibus*) 25–6. Hearing and smelling both rely on air. Sight, he says, is due to the combined effects of the flashing fire within the eye and the water which surrounds it.
- 35 See Theophrastus, *On the Senses* 26; Lo Presti (2009). Laks (1999: 251, 267) sees a shift towards integrated cognitive processes in Presocratic philosophy.
- 36 On Presocratic theories of smell see Baltussen (2015).
- 37 DK 24A5.8–10 (= Theophrastus, *On the Senses* 25). See also DK 24A9.
- 38 Theophrastus, *On the Senses* 43.
- 39 This is a common assumption, found in the Hippocratic writers as well as Aristotle and Galen. The chapters by Totelin (Chapter 3) and Baker (Chapter 8) examine the medical implications of taste.
- 40 Plato, *Timaeus* 75d–e.
- 41 Aristotle, *On the Soul* 420b17–20.
- 42 Aristotle, *On the Soul* 423a17–21; *History of Animals* 494b17–18: “Of man’s senses, touch is the most accurate; taste is second; in the others, man is surpassed by a great number of animals.”
- 43 Aristotle, *History of Animals* 492b27–30.
- 44 Aristotle, *History of Animals* 492b30–4.
- 45 See Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* (*De generatione animalium*) 788a29–35 on the

best tongue for speech; cf. Aristotle, *History of Animals* 534b29–535a3, 536b6–9. Aristotle, *On Respiration* (*De respiratione*) 476a16–21 also identifies the mouth as a necessary feature of refrigeration, since it is through the mouth that breath passes in and out.

46Aristotle, *On the Soul* 422b1–10.

47Although Vesalius' *On the Fabric of the Human Body* (1553 and 1555) makes path-breaking strides in understanding the tongue's musculature, the analysis of the surface, arteries and nerves do not go further than Galen's *Anatomical Procedures*. Vesalius (1543: 2.252–6) laments the loss of the later books of Galen's treatise in his account of the muscles of the tongue. Much of his own work bears a strong resemblance to that of Galen.

48Galen, *Anatomical Procedures, the Later Books* 10.6–8, trans. Duckworth in Lyons & Towers (1962).

49Galen's anatomical understanding of the tongue supersedes not only the analysis of his predecessors, but also that of many scholars and anatomists prior to the nineteenth century, who were dependent on his work. It is not until Bellingeri's (1818) discovery of the *chorda tympani* as the nerve responsible for mediating taste from the front of the tongue, and the 1867 discoveries, by Lovén and Schwalbe, of taste buds, that analysis of the tongue moved towards an understanding of the neural connections we see in modern sensory research.

50Galen, *On Method in Medicine* (*Methodus medendi*) II, 10.93–5 Kühn.

51Hippocrates, *On Ancient Medicine* (*De prisca medicina*) 14: the body consists of a vast number of humours including salt, bitter, sweet, acid, sour and insipid. Hippocrates, *On Flesh* (*De carnibus*) 13: sweet, bitter, fatty and glutinous are among the body constituents. See also Plato, *Symposium* 186d6–7 and Hippocrates, *On Diet* (*De diaeta*) 1.3.

52Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* 1231a6–16; see also *Nicomachean Ethics* 1118a16–35. See Pearson (2012: 92–100) for discussion.

53For discussion of Plato, Aristotle and the Hellenistic philosophers on the pleasures of the body see Warren (2014).

54Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* 1222a22–40.

55Food as a functional good: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1106b1–5. See Tracy (1969) on physiology and the mean in Plato and Aristotle.

56Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1153a25–35. Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1175b36–1176a3 on the purity of the senses. See Heinaman (2011: 19–40) for discussion of the differentiations being made between sensory and intellectual activities and pleasures. See Plato, *Gorgias* 517b–518b for an argument that cookery is not an art but a routine.

57Bakhtin (1984: 279–86, esp. 281). These themes are picked up throughout the volume, but especially in Hitch's discussion of the transformation of taste and consumption metaphors in [Chapter 1](#) and Gowers' discussion of Roman taste metaphors in [Chapter 5](#).

58See Aristotle, *On the Senses* 435b20.

59For the comic figure of the Pythagorean vegetarian see Antiphanes, *The Memorials* fr. 158, *The Bags* fr. 133, *Bumble-Bee* fr. 63; Alexis, *Woman Devoted to Pythagoras* fr. 201, *Tarentines* fr. 223, on which see Arnott (1996). Cf. Aristophanes, *The Devotee of Pythagoras* fr. 9. Fragments of Greek comedy are cited according to the edition of Kassel & Austin (1983–95) unless otherwise specified. For Socrates' commentary on gourmandizing see Xenophon *Memorabilia* 3.14.1–7; cf. Plato, *Symposium* 219e–220a. See also Diogenes the Cynic, who found raw meat indigestible (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* 6.34) and Chrysippus, *On the Good and on Pleasure: For Aristokreon* fr. 3 = SVF 3.198. On ancient vegetarianism see Dombrowski (1984), Muers &

Grumett (2008) and Finn (2009).

- 60Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* (*De natura deorum*) 2.146, cf. 2.134–6 on the teeth and stomach. On the senses more broadly 2.141–6.
- 61Long & Sedley (1997) 21M = fr. 409 Usener = Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 12.546f.
- 62Epicurus, *Deperditorum librorum reliquiae* fr. 22 Arrighetti = Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 12.546e.
- 63Long & Sedley (1997) 21B5 = Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* 5. See Davidson (1997: 3–35) on fish and the *opson*, also discussed by Banducci ([Chapter 7](#)).
- 64Epicurus, *Vatican Sayings* 33, cf. 59 = 21G LS. For a full discussion of the Epicurean position, Plutarch's Platonic opposition to it and the role of memory in retaining such pleasures, see Warren (2014: 79–103, 175–209).
- 65Epicurus, *Key Doctrines* 18. On moral overtones related to variation and mixture in Roman satire see Gowers (1993: 120–6) and Bramble (1974).
- 66Long & Sedley (1997) 24D = fr. 138 Usener = Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* 10.22.
- 67Gosling & Taylor (1982: 343–54, esp. 351–4). Cf. Ofellus in Horace, *Satires* 2. See Davidson (1997) on self-control and desire in Greek literature.
- 68This is also true of emperors who were overindulgent and seen as lacking virtue, most notably Vitellius, whom we are told by Suetonius (7.3.13) favoured flamingos' tongues. See Gowers ([Chapter 5](#)) for more on Roman tastes. See Bradley (2011).
- 69Diodorus 2.31; Naevius, *Colax* 27–9 Ribbeck; Plautus, *Curculio* 358, *Stichus* 233, 386, 395. On the connection between Heracles and parasites see Fraenkel (1960: 272 n.1), where he argues that it is a Plautine innovation. Lucian, *Icaromenippus* 27, provides evidence that “Greek parasites too had a special relationship with Heracles”. See MacKinnon ([Chapter 9](#)) on the consumption and taste of meat in the ancient world.
- 70Padilla (1992). For more on the parasite, see Telò ([Chapter 4](#)).
- 71For the centrality of the belly in Homer, *Odyssey* 18 see Worman (2008: 37–9) and Steiner (2009). For the stomach as the source of all evils see Alexis 215; cf. also Diphilus 60, Nicolaus 1.7, 43. In Roman comedy see Plautus *Bacaria* fr. 1. For discussion of protruding stomachs in costume see Hughes (2011: 84–5, 146, 180–1) and Csapo (2014: 59–60).
- 72Aristophanes, *Birds* 1694–705. Aristophanes' creation is based on the ἐγχειρογάστροες (“hand bellies”), creatures who supposedly had hands connected directly to their stomachs, but who, by the fifth century, were considered manual labourers in Hecataeus' ethnography, on which see Nestle (1942: 138 n.2). See also Antimachus fr. 77 *Supplementum Hellenisticum*; Kassel & Austin (1983–95) on Nicophron's comedy of this title. Roman satire plays with similar imagery as early as Ennius (fr. 14–19 Worthington, on which see Van Rooy (1965) and (Gowers 1993: 120)), especially the distended stomach. See also Plautus, *Casina* 777, where women are criticised for stuffing their stomachs; Juvenal *Satires* 2.113–14, 3.97, 4.107, 10.355; Persius 1.57, 2.52, 6.74; Petronius, *Satyrica* 49.10; 66, where the stuffed stomachs also function as textual metaphors. Cf. Martial 10.45.6, 13.3.8.
- 73Plutarch, “How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend”, *Moralia* 48e–74e = 3.669 Bergk: γαστήρ ὄλον τὸ σῶμα, πανταχῇ βλέπων / ὀφθαλμός, ἔρπον τοῖς ὁδοῦσι θηρίον.
- 74Horace, *Satires* 2.
- 75Plautus, *Captivi* 846–51, 894–918, *Persa* 92–8, *Miles gloriosus* 667. εὖοφος ἀγορά in Crito 3 and Timocles 11. For discussion see Nesselrath (1985: 32–6) and Damon (1998). On insatiable hunger or large appetites see Epicharmus 35.7

- Kaibel; Eupolis 166; Alexis 183, 233, 263; Antiphanes 82; Aristophon 10; Axionicus 6; Diphilus 61; Epigenes 2; Eubulus 117.1–4; Sophilus 7–8; Timocles 13, 31; Plautus *Captivi* 177, *Curculio* 309–25, *Menaechmi* 222–3, *Miles gloriosus* 24, 33–4, 49, *Persa* 59–60, *Stichus* 159–60, 575.
- 76 Lucian, *On the Parasite* 5: τὸ ἐπίστασθαι τὰς ἀρετὰς καὶ κακίας τῶν σιτίων καὶ τῶν ὄψων πολυπραγμοσύνην. See also Terence, *Eunuchus* 255–9.
- 77 See Damon (1998).
- 78 Aristotle, *History of Animals* 492b28–34; Galen, *Anatomical Procedures, the Later Books* 10.7.75. See also Galen, *Method in Medicine* 1.46 Kühn.
- 79 Homer, *Iliad* 11.636–44. Also at Homer, *Odyssey* 10.234–5. Plato, *Republic* 405e, describes this mixture as *phlegmatōdes*. See Richardson (1974: 344–8) for discussion of this drink among the rites at Eleusis and for further bibliography. The first reference to eating in Western literature at *Iliad* 1.457–74 begins and ends with the two products of the tongue – namely the spoken prayer to Apollo and the hymn (*paean*s). Again it is what comes out of rather than what goes into the mouth which gives pleasure, this time to the god himself.
- 80 See Livarda (Chapter 10) for a discussion of the way archaeobotany provides a new window on these socio-cultural concerns. The Boeotians, Ionians and the Sicilians are famous for their fancy appetites. Sicily is “famous for its luxurious tables”, Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 12.518c; see also Aristophanes, *Banqueters* fr. 225; Alexis, *All Night Festival or Hired Workers* fr. 178, so too are Ionia (Callias, *Cyclopes* fr. 8; Antiphanes, *Woman of Dodona* fr. 91; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 12.516c;), Boeotia (Diphilus, *Boeotian* fr. 22) and Macedonia (see Anaxandrides, *Protesilaus*, fr. 42; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 14.662f.). Cf. The restrained dining habits of the Spartans and Cretans in Antiphanes, *Archon* fr. 46; Cratinus, *Wealth* fr. 175; Epilycus, *Coraliscus* fr. 4. See discussion in Davidson (1997: 4–7) and Wilkins (2000: 257–368).
- 81 Kilgour (1990: 8). The role of taste in determining and marking identity is a key theme explored in this volume by Banducci, Livarda, Gowers, Warren and Caseau.
- 82 Clattering girls at Delos: *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* 162–4. Pigs and frogs: Galen, *Variations of the Pulse (De pulsuum differentiis)* 2.5 = 8.586 Kühn; Bats: Herodotus 4.183; Horses: Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes* 463; Swallows: Aristophanes, *Frogs* 679f; Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1050; Sophocles, *Antigone* 1002. Cicadas: Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 658F. Cf. Homer, *Iliad* 2.867 for Carian βαρβαροφώνων. See Ps.-Xenophon, *Constitution of Athens* 2.8, where Greeks are said to differ from one another in *phōnē*, *diaita* and *schema*.
- 83 Homer, *Iliad* 9.442–3.
- 84 Nestor: Homer, *Iliad* 1.248–9; Thersites: Homer, *Iliad* 2.211–23.
- 85 Theognis 421; Simonides 541.2 PMG; Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 188; Euripides, *Orestes* 903; Aristophanes, *Frogs* 838. See Griffith (1995). On teeth as a barrier, see also, Paulas (Chapter 12).
- 86 Protagoras was among those who insisted that he could teach his students the art of politics and how to make the “weaker cause seem to be the stronger”; see Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1402a20–30.
- 87 Theophrastus, *Characters* discusses how the mouth reveals the man; Cf. James 3:1–12, where the notion of the tongue as capable of praise and blame, blasphemy and eulogy, is responsible for his injunction to his readers to guard their tongues.
- 88 Plato, *Gorgias* 487a. On *parrhesia* see Foucault in Pearson (2001) and Raaflaub ([1985] 2004).
- 89 See Segal (1994b) and (1995b). The oral features of the Gorgons are also emphasised in the Hesiodic *Shield of Heracles* 235 and Euripides, *Heracles Mad*

- 880–4. See Lowe (2015: 96–113) for discussion and bibliography of the visual aspects of Medusa in classical literature and contemporary theory.
- 90 Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5.180. Medusa's *os* similarly transforms Polydectes' *ora* at 249. See also Medusa's creative force at 4.743, where, at the touch of her mouth, seaweed is transformed into coral; cf. lines 656, 771. Cf. Salzmann-Mitchell (2005), who reads the Ovidian *os* as a key component of the gaze.
- 91 For example, see the volume cover. See Howe (1958). This is true of most representations of Medusa and the Gorgoneion in the Archaic and Early Classical period. It is only later that representations of Medusa are made beautiful. See, recently, Lowe (2015: 98–102) on Medusa's transformation from monster to maiden.
- 92 See Potts (1982: 27, 29) and the classic treatment in Wundt (1908).
- 93 This is the classic psychoanalytic reading of the figure. Freud ([1922] 2003: 85): "If Medusa's head takes the place of a representation of the female genitals, or rather if it isolates their horrifying effects from their pleasure-giving ones, it may be recalled that displaying the genitals is familiar in other connections as an apotropaic act. What arouses horror in oneself will produce the same effect upon the enemy against whom one is seeking to defend oneself." See Cixous' (1976) feminist response as well as the gender-based treatment of Medusa in contemporary classical scholarship exemplified by Feldman neé Howe (1965) and Zajko & Leonard (2006), among many others. See Telò (Chapter 4) for further discussion of the mouth and sexuality.
- 94 Martial's epigrams are full of such imagery, as are the poems of Catullus. See Gowers (Chapter 5 and 1993). See Kilgour (1990) on Ovid's Hermaphroditus at *Metamorphoses* 4.274–388, where the inability to fully internalize the other leads to a cannibalistic union of the two bodies.
- 95 Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* (*De rerum natura*) 4.1076–85, trans. Brown (1987: 151).
- 96 Pleasure, it turns out, is itself the thing that mitigates the aggressive pain-causing act, reigning in the overly aggressive passion of the mouth.
- 97 The Empedoclean allusions in this passage are striking.
- 98 Gowers further explores the Roman fascination with the lips and teeth in Chapter 5.
- 99 Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15.88–95, trans. Miller (1916): "Oh, how criminal it is for flesh to be stored away in flesh, for one greedy body to grow fat by eating the body of another, for one living creature to go on living through the destruction of another living thing! And so in the midst of the wealth of food which Earth, the best of mothers, has produced, it is your pleasure to chew the piteous flesh of slaughtered animals with your savage teeth, and thus to repeat the Cyclops' horrid manners! And you cannot, without destroying other life, appease the cravings of your greedy and insatiable maw!"
- 100 See Kilgour (1990) for a detailed analysis of cannibalistic metaphor.
- 101 Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* 4.1108–14, trans. Brown (1987: 153).
- 102 The nose functions in a similar way. See Bradley's (2015) introduction on the varied functions of the nose.
- 103 The role of taste is central to the study and practice of traditional Chinese medicine, on which see Atkins & Versluys (2006) and Nugent-Head (2014). I am grateful to Dominic Harbinson for the references.

Tastes of Greek poetry

From Homer to Aristophanes

Sarah Hitch

Food enjoys a particularly well-established and central place in classical Greek literature, which provides a unique and sophisticated reflection of the perils experienced by all subsistence economies. From the earliest sources, Homer and Hesiod (approximately 750 BCE), food is one of the most powerful and frequently used symbols of social and cultural identity.¹ By the Classical period, food as a social and cultural marker was also a literary *topos* and the subject of literary endeavours in its own right. A hexameter poem in the Hesiod tradition was written on the subject of fish in the fourth century BCE and it was joined by the development of cookbooks and professional cooks.² Although this development reflects the spread of literacy in the Classical period, equally important is the increased interest in food preparation, ingredients and the status conferred by food imports following the Persian wars in the early fifth century BCE. Additionally, the choice of foods available to wealthy Greeks, as portrayed in the literature of the period, highlights the pleasures offered by individual foods, and in this respect the concept of “taste” comes to the fore.

In this chapter, I trace the parallel, but not synonymous, development of the poetics of eating and tasting. In subsequent chapters, Telò and Gowers will focus on more subtle reflections of taste in Greek and Roman literature; whereas I look at two critical contexts for the development of a poetic discourse of food, eating and taste. Epic and lyric poetry and, most of all, Attic comedy contribute to the establishment of taste itself as a social concept. This topic has been relatively overlooked by modern scholars, in contrast to the recent flurry of interest in ancient foodways and the role of the archaic symposium in the development of Greek poetry and its self-reflexive, antagonistic poetics of authorship.³ The presentation of food in Greek literature – and to some extent its taste – has been the subject

of recent scholarship, but in terms of literary development the trajectory of food and taste is quite different. Eating, as a primary illustration of wealth and religious piety in early poetry, becomes an anecdotal expression of greed in Classical Athens under the influence of a sort of market globalization of food and increasing reliance on imports. Taste, by contrast, begins its poetic life as the expression of choice; the Greek verb *geuomai* “taste” is etymologically linked to the English word “choose”, and the post-epic metaphors of taste embrace and modify notions of danger and experimentation implied by the Greek concept of taste.⁴

In epic, taste generally refers to an experiment of a fleeting or unique type rather than highlighting a connection with consumption, since epic heroes are not given a choice of food. The alimentary abundance provided by Homeric kings or barbaric meals in Odysseus’ travels mark both the wealth and power of the providers and the subservient position of their guests. Accepting the generous meal provided by a host is a sign of the acceptance of his power, and the Homeric king often demonstrates his wealth and power through feasting. The feast, created at his demand, offers the guests no choice other than acceptance or denial of his graciousness.⁵ Indeed, the pleasure of Homeric food derives from the community and is ultimately about control through provision for groups, predicated on the basic fear of starvation. Unlike eating, taste cannot be controlled: it is experienced, rather than created. Taste in Homer represents a choice of experiences, and is highly individualized. Groups feast, while individuals taste. Since there is no individualized experience of consumption in Homer, there is no emphasis on the taste of what is consumed. An exception which proves the rule, so to speak, is the Cyclops’ greedy consumption of wine provided by Odysseus. Odysseus gives Polyphemus wine in order to get him drunk so as to incapacitate him and escape. The Cyclops drinks alone and does not mix the wine with water, both signs of his monstrous nature and abstention from normative social rules or religious piety. The wine is described as “pleasing” to him, and he compares it to ambrosia and nectar to signify how pleasurable the taste is for him.⁶ However, taste terminology is not used, nor does the Cyclops himself describe the wine as sweet – his taste experience is focalized by the narrator.

The implicit sensual pleasures of taste, primarily “sweetness”, describe a range of activities in archaic poetry, but become increasingly associated with poetry itself and the gifts of the Muses.⁷ Taste is a fitting metaphor for such encounters because the

relationship between the Muses and the singer is a personal one, and the performance of the inspired bard is typically personalized and individualized in Homer and Hesiod. As we will see, the nurturing role of the Muses as dispensers of sweetness merges in archaic lyric with the social importance of fighting bravely in combat resulting in an antagonistic poetics of taste under the influence of the world's first "food culture". In the fifth century BCE, when the choice of food becomes the predominant expression of social identity, rather than its production method or frequency of consumption, we will see that the prestige of food moves into the expression of artistic production.

Food and tasting in early Greek epic

In Homer and Hesiod, descriptions of eating emphasize surplus and deprivation, reflections of the underlying threat of starvation faced by subsistence communities. The taste of food is not at issue, nor are diners described as choosing among varieties of food. Outside of the sensory pleasure of eating, a culinary discourse of pleasure is created around abundance and entertainment at the feast. As we approach the topic of taste, we must observe a distinction, at times slight, between food, eating and taste. Food triggers a range of associations and contexts for human beings, some culturally determined and others instinctive. In Greek texts, food is often representative of positive, even Utopian, settings, as we shall see. Eating, on the other hand, carries the more sinister undertones of avoidance of starvation and is often about control: lavish banquets provided by Homeric kings are displays of status and achievement, with the individual's worth to his community expressed in terms of invitation to and apportionment of meat at the feast.⁸ An illustration of this distinction between eating and food are the two most common Greek words for food: *sitos*, the staple essential to survival, usually bread, and *opson*, what you put on top – the relish, such as the onion served by King Nestor's wife, Hecamede, in Homer's *Iliad*.⁹ In other words, eating is a necessity, and the food consumed can be generically described as *sitos*. Luxury foods such as roast meat and wine and accompaniments to food for the purpose of enhancing taste elevate the meal from eating to feasting and are not usually described as *sitos*. The idea of "taste" in such contexts is less about savouring the flavours, as we might expect in colloquial English, and more about the way food habits express an individual's lack of self-restraint through excessive relish consumption

beyond the fulfilment of hunger and avoidance of starvation.

Eating, as a necessity, is portrayed in a positive light when abundant food is provided by the royal host to create an environment of leisure and social harmony. As such, the effortless and abundant supply of food, rather than its taste, is essential. Numerous lengthy descriptions of the king's banquet, one of the type scenes in Homeric poetry, are repeated at intervals throughout the poems and are nearly identical in form. Generally the host, usually the king, provides a meat dinner for his guests, sometimes with a special portion of meat for the guest of honour. These feasts in Homer are frequently concluded by a formulaic verse. Homer's heroes can feast until their hunger is satisfied, described here as literally "throwing aside their desire (*eros*)", signalling that the pleasure afforded by the feast is in the assuagement of hunger.¹⁰ We can compare a description using a related verb (*eratizein*) of a starving lion "desiring" meat.¹¹ The need for sustenance is basic for all living beings, and hunger is portrayed throughout early epic as one of the most shameful of mortal ailments; for this reason Odysseus comments to the Phaeacian king Alcinous: "But let me have dinner, though I'm in distress, for nothing else is more like a dog than the hateful belly."¹² The best of the heroes and their rich king can feast endlessly to show their prosperity, and to distinguish themselves from animals and barbarians in their civilized consumption of meat, but the sensual pleasures of food are not at the forefront of these depictions. The erotic associations of food and sex so predominant in fifth-century BCE Attic comedy have not yet developed. In this respect, desire for foods or tastes is also part of the generally neutralized descriptions of human passions in Homeric poetry.¹³ Although later authors, and philosophers in particular, were impressed with the dispassion of the Homeric heroes, recently scholars have interpreted such detachment as a sign of distinguishing Greek poetry from the more visceral Near Eastern epics.¹⁴ This moderated picture of sensory pleasures confines the frequent association of Homeric banquets with pleasure to the social sphere experience, rather than to the enjoyment of food itself. Pleasure (*hēdos*) comes from the company gathered and the freedom to sit at leisure rather than the sensation of eating or taste.¹⁵ Conversely, in Homer's *Odyssey*, the greed and arrogance of Penelope's suitors is expressed through the frequency of their feasting, the absence of the host provider and, most importantly, their behaviour at their feasts.¹⁶ Thus, eating in Homer is rather narrowly depicted as either a group activity reflecting social hierarchy or a perilous necessity scarcely

distinguishable from the needs of animals.

Unlike eating, food in the Homeric epics is frequently objectified through an idealized gaze, best expressed in the descriptions of utopian places favoured by gods. Divine places are full of food, spontaneously produced.¹⁷ Hesiod's golden race take pleasure in banquets and parties: no specifics are given other than the fact that the food grows effortlessly (*Works and Days* 115–19). Equally, prolific food production, usually trees which abound in fruit year-round, is a key descriptor of places favoured, visited or inhabited by deities. The difficulty and danger faced by subsistence farmers are not far from these idealized images and even form the basis of Hesiod's hexameter poem *Works and Days*, which utilizes many of the same thematic associations of hunger and the blessings of the Muses, but contextualized in the gaze of an outsider who must produce his own food, rather than a guest at the king's court. As tempting as these effortlessly produced foods may have been for a Homeric audience, they are not to be found on the plates of diners, but rather in panoramic descriptions.¹⁸ For example, a lengthy depiction of the grounds of King Alcinous is given in *Odyssey* 7.112–32:

Trees grow there, tall and luxuriant,
splendid-fruited pear, pomegranate and apple,
sweet fig, and luxuriant olive.
Their fruit never perishes or fails
winter or summer, all through the year, but always and ever
West Wind, blowing, grows some and ripens others.
Pear ripens on pear, apple on apple,
grape cluster on grape cluster, fig upon fig.
His vineyard, full of fruit, takes root there,
part of it, a sunny spot in a level place,
dries in the sun, in another part, they gather some
while stomping others. Unripe grapes are at the front,
some shedding blossoms, others darkening.
There, beside the lowest row, trim beds of herbs
of all kinds grow and are perennially green.
In it are two springs. One spreads through the whole garden,
and, on the other side, one flows under the courtyard threshold
toward the lofty house, from which cityfolk draw water.
Such were the splendid gifts of gods in the palace of Alcinous.¹⁹

If any sense provides pleasure associated with food, it is vision.²⁰ This

long description of the Phaeacian's bountiful garden is not linked with the subsequent meat feasts hosted by the king; similarly in other type scene dinners, the emphasis is on abundance and camaraderie.²¹ We may compare the first feast in the poem, in which Telemachus and Athena dine among Penelope's suitors.

A venerable housekeeper brought bread and set it before them
placing many foods on it, pleasing them from her stores.

A carver raised and placed before them platters of meats
of all kinds and put golden cups beside them.

A herald came often and poured wine for them.

In came the manly suitors. Then, as they
sat down in rows on chairs and couches,

heralds poured water on their hands,

slaves heaped bread in baskets beside them,

and boys filled mixing bowls to the brim with drink.

They threw their hands on the good things laid ready before
them.

Then after the suitors had dispatched desire for food
and drink, other things caught their minds' attention,

the performance and the dance, for they accompany a feast.²²

In both descriptions, the abundance of food is the narrator's focus, a symbol of the kings' wealth. Although the housekeeper sets before them "many foods" from her stores for their pleasure, the poet does not dwell on these relishes, or indeed on the cuts or types of meat they consume. The abundance of these ingredients and the accompanying bread and wine is sufficient, and the poet sees no need to linger further on the details of the provisions of the feast in the halls of the kings.

Already in antiquity, commentators on the Homeric diet hypothesize that the highly stylized feasting in Homer was circumscribed to better express the ethical and social standards of the heroes: Athenaeus observes that Homer describes a fuller range of food than that eaten by the heroes and concludes that the restricted diets represent the heroes' moderate temperaments, which in turn express their reverence for the gods and acceptance of their own mortality.²³ In other words, divinity can be expressed in a cornucopia, but the pious Greek man knows his limits. These views reflect contemporary attitudes of the early Roman imperial period, in which food choices were so well established in literature that their absence

in Homer was a topic of study.²⁴ A description of Tantalus in the *Odyssey* illustrates the roots of this discourse, as well as the impossibility of taste and food choice for the Homeric world:

Trees, lofty and leafy, poured fruit down on his head,
splendid-fruited pear, pomegranate, and apple,
sweet fig, and luxuriant olive.
Whenever the old man straightened to touch them with his
hands,
the wind cast them to the shadowy clouds.²⁵

This description of the food desired by Tantalus is highly focalized from his viewpoint: the foods appear luxurious to the eyes, but cannot be grasped much less consumed. Such evocative descriptions of food are peppered throughout the Homeric poems. In each of these examples the appearance of abundant food is vividly described, but the taste experience is only implied or, in the case of Tantalus, denied. The taste of food is not a specific characteristic in early Greek poetry and even the “splendid-fruited pear, pomegranate, and apple, sweet (*glukeros*) fig and luxuriant (*tēlethaō*) olive”, are found in formulaic verses describing a place more often than they describe food.²⁶ Both the Underworld and Alcinous’ garden are divinely created places, and as such they exhibit similar natural abundance. Calypso, too, inhabits an island blessed with an idyllic, abundant landscape (*Odyssey* 5.55–73), but when she tells Odysseus that she has provided well for his journey she says “then I myself will provide food, water and red wine, satisfying things which will ward off hunger”.²⁷ Natural abundance characterizes divine places, but it is presented as a pleasurable sight rather than a tasty meal.

Even when the laudatory language of these magical landscapes or great feasts draw on taste-related terminology, the associations with taste experience itself is minimal. The “luxuriant” (*tēlethaō*) quality of the olives is really an expression of growth and blooming, recalling the emphasis on abundance in the meat feasts. Similarly, the formulaic adjective *menoikēs* is frequently used in Homer with a meaning of “satisfying” or “appealing”, but it is non-specific and, again, usually refers to abundance. Even adjectives that have obvious connections with taste do not predominantly emphasize the sensory experience. Honey, as the primary sweetener used in ancient Greece, often underscores the luxurious nature of “honey-sweet” wine, while meat qualified as “rich and fatty” predominantly signals an emphasis

on supply and satiety.²⁸ Sweetness (*glukus* or *hēdus*), the only taste sensation routinely applied to foods that can be explicitly linked to the sensory pleasure of eating, is ambiguous in its use. The adjectives and adverbs meaning “sweet” or “sweetly” are frequently found with non-food related activities, such as music, sleep and laughter, suggesting that such terms connote a concept of pleasure rather than a specific taste-related experience.²⁹ Thus, descriptions of feasts as having “boundless meat and sweet wine” ultimately accentuate the abundance and pleasure of the event.³⁰

If the pleasures of food are visible, the pleasures of feasting are audible. As we have seen, food, described as an object on its own terms, is a panorama, dissociated from eating and the practical assuagement of hunger. Feasting, on the other hand, brings together the dual pleasures of the mouth: that of the voice and that of abundant consumption. Feasts are described generally in terms of aural pleasure because they provide the setting for music. From the Muse-drenched lips of the singers at the homes of Odysseus and Alcinous in the *Odyssey*, the most vividly imagined types of Homeric pleasure spread to all who hear the divinely inspired song.³¹ Odysseus, after hearing the song of Demodocus, sums up the experience thus:

For I say that no occasion is in any way more pleasant
than when merriment takes hold, throughout the whole
kingdom,
and guests, throughout the house, sit in rows
listening to a singer, while beside them tables are full
of bread and meat, and, drawing wine from the mixing bowl,
the wine bearer brings and pours it into goblets.
In a way, this seems to my mind the finest thing there is.³²

In Homer the sweet and savoury tastes of the feast are subordinated to the sweet au/orality of poetry itself. The foundations of the later presentation of poetry as sustenance passing from Muses to poet are found here in the vivid Homeric depiction of the power of music. In the epic descriptions of the Muses’ gifts, the association of poetic production and food begins: in Hesiod, the Muses pour forth sweet sounds from their mouths (*Theogony* 39–40) and create singers of poetry by pouring sweetness on their tongues (83–4). The mouth and tongue are conceptualized as receptors of pleasure, but only in a metaphorical sense.³³ This metaphor of taste, as we shall see, becomes

one of the most predominant modes of poetic self-representation and critique for ancient Greek audiences and their Roman inheritors.³⁴

The pleasure that comes from the mouths of singers is inexorably linked with the divine origin of their song, a possibility that is never fully realized for what actually goes into the mouth. As with the divine landscapes we have just explored, there is a shifty distance between the basic mortal need for sustenance through food and the gifts provided by gods. Such distance enriches the metaphor of taste associated with the Muses and what flows from the mouths of singers. The visceral nature of the transference of epic song from Muses' lips to singers' mouths acts as a strikingly physical – and highly sensual – bridge between gods and men that the later, prevalent metaphor of “honey-sweet” seems to lack.³⁵

The physicality of the exchange between poet and Muse, the images of eating and mouths, are avoided in descriptions of the hero's banquet, but this nuanced association of food and divinity hints at an aspect of potential divine benevolence that is otherwise absent. The Muses provide au/oral sustenance for their chosen poets, but the depiction of the Olympian gods' eating habits is inconsistent and confused, with gods at times dining on hecatombs with the Aithiopes, but at other times partaking only in divine nectar and ambrosia.³⁶ For example, Calypso and Odysseus share a table, but not the food:

They reached the hollow cave, the goddess and the man,
and he then sat upon the chair from which Hermes
had arisen, and the nymph laid all kind of food beside him,
to eat and drink, such kinds as mortal men eat.
She sat opposite divine Odysseus
and her slave women set ambrosia and nectar beside her.³⁷

The narrator emphasizes the shared space mortals and gods inhabit – the cave, even the very seat that Odysseus shares with the messenger of the gods. Indeed, the goddess herself serves her guest an ample meal, but the mortal fare itself remains unspecified, even though we have been told about the bountiful landscape. The goddess herself, by contrast, dines on nectar and ambrosia. The message on this occasion is clear: mortal and the divine may partake in the companionship of a shared *table*, but not in a shared *taste experience*.

Gods may be fellow diners at the tables of the Homeric kings, but they do not regularly bestow divine epicurean bounty on their favourites. Demeter, goddess of the harvest, and Dionysus, god of

wine, are marginalized in the Homeric pantheon.³⁸ As we have seen, the cultivated fruits and herbs of Alcinous' magical gardens are not clearly utilized in the subsequent banquets in his palace. Moreover, he speaks only of the "hecatombs" he has shared when feasting with the gods, although livestock are one of the few missing aspects of Alcinous' divinely given, idealized farm. Alcinous is blessed with divine companionship at his table and a divinely inspired garden, but the two are not related by production and consumption. The reasons for this distance between gods and fertility in Homer are complex, and the picture, while more fluid in Hesiod, is not substantially changed.³⁹

The Homeric legacy of consumption

Just as the epic association of musical pleasure and sweetness was to have a profound influence on later poetics of taste, equally important is the development of a negative discourse of eating which anticipates the strong fifth-century BCE rhetoric against the dangers of gluttony, consuming the wrong types of food or bad table manners. The Homeric conception of abundance is refracted in this period's salutary theme of the dangers posed by imported foods and the abundance of choice. The relative distance between feasting and consumption in the Homeric poems is one example among many concerning bodily functions and the "decarnalization" of the epic world. A further epic strand to the complex metaphors of food and feasting in later poetry is the negative implications of consumption and ingestion.

In Homer, ingestion and consumption are inherently dangerous because they alter the consumer: eating lotus in the *Odyssey* takes away memory, while drinking blood bring remembrance (or at least the ability to communicate) in the world of the dead.⁴⁰ The divine sorceress Circe drugs Odysseus' men through poisoned drinks, and it is only when Odysseus refuses to dine with her without his companions that they are returned to their human form.⁴¹ Consumption of food can be as inviting as it is dangerous, and these notions also underwrite the epic use of taste as a metaphor for unique and often deadly experiences, as we shall see in the next section. In Homer, the earth is said to swallow bodies; we may think of the English phrase "jaws of death".⁴² Wasting one's own inheritance, or that of another, is often described as "consuming property", a metaphor frequently used in the Classical period.⁴³ Once food is consumed, it cannot return to its previous state, and, by extension, in Greek thought the irreversible

change brought about by ingestion can affect the eater too. The same may also be said about smells:⁴⁴ there are four descriptions of a “sweet” odour, and all have sinister implications. The smell of roasting meat is sweet to Odysseus when his comrades roast the Cattle of the Sun in his absence, as is the smell to the god Hermes, although meat is apparently a threat to his divinity and he must resist.⁴⁵ The wine offered by Odysseus to inebriate the Cyclops has a sweet smell and the narcissus flower tempts Persephone by its scent.⁴⁶ These sweet smells tempt individuals towards negative transformations – death for the companions, a loss of immortal status for Hermes, blindness for the Cyclops and marriage in the underworld for Persephone.

The act of eating is controlled by social customs, almost always guaranteed in religious terms, and the sign of a happy, god-fearing community is respect for eating customs and vice versa. In epic, as well as archaic lyric poetry, raw foods, cannibalism and other perversions of feasting express disorder: in the travels of Odysseus, the roasted meat feasts of the Phaeacians, occasionally attended by the gods themselves, form a contrast to the raw meals of dairy and human flesh eaten by the Cyclops, who rejects the gods.⁴⁷ The Phaeacians convey Odysseus home, while the Cyclops tries to kill him; the safety and danger of the two foreign lands is synopsized in their food habits.⁴⁸

Such perverse eating endangers good heroes, but a discourse of “disgust” is always aimed at the behaviour of the people and their lack of self-moderation or respect for the gods, rather than the substance of the food. So, Telemachus worries that the disguised Athena will be so distressed by the spectacle of the hubristic suitors dining that she will not be able to enjoy her own supper (*Odyssey* 1.134). The bounteous cheeses in the Cyclops’ cave draw Odysseus to meet him, but his subsequent meals of human flesh and raw milk are not described as disgusting, but rather as “wicked deeds” (*schetlia erga*, *Odyssey* 9.295). Similarly, later writers discuss pleasure and disgust as abstract concepts, but not often with reference to food. Rather, the discourse remains one of moderation, character and upbringing. For example, the Athenian speaker in Plato’s *Laws* (802d) compares pleasure and disgust (*hēdonē* and *aēdia*) with reference to the way music differently affects men according to a good or poor upbringing. The good citizen takes pleasure in music and is improved by the experience, while the badly educated man is disgusted.

The Homeric picture of eating had a far-reaching impact on later literature. From at least the fifth century BCE, writers reflected on the

diet and eating habits of Homeric heroes in contrast to the potential variety and expense of contemporary meals. Socrates points to the restriction of the heroes' diet to only meat and wine, without sauce, and underwriting this speculation on Homeric food is the idea that the cultural identity and ethical well-being of people is reflected in their diet. He connects the unadorned meal with the strength of the heroes, and asserts that the athletes of the ideal state ought to follow such a lean example, rather than the contemporary luxuries of Sicilian banquets or Attic pastries.⁴⁹ The democratic Athens of Socrates' day defined itself not only by the law-courts and assembly votes, but also by the free market in the agora, in which a wide variety of delicacies could be purchased.⁵⁰ But such a free market not only reinforces a focus on provision, similar to that of the Homeric poems, but also highlights the dangers of a monetized, potentially corrupt system. In this context, abundance is still an ideal but also a danger in the temptation toward overindulgence, a quality always much maligned in Greek thought. Since this market abundance was not simply provision of food but choice of delicacies, the literary picture of eating moves sharply towards pleasure and taste as opposed to conviviality and music. A passage from a late fifth-century BCE comic poet, Pherecrates, describes the abundance awaiting the dead in the underworld:

There everything was mixed together by Wealth and made from all good things in every possible way. Rivers full of porridge and black broth with scoops of bread would gurgle and flow through the narrow ways, and delicious flat-cakes as well. So a morsel would slide easily and smoothly by itself down the gullets of the dead. Beside the rivers instead of shells were scattered haggises and steaming slices of sizzling black pudding. Moreover, there were baked fish fillets nicely prepared with every sort of seasoning, and eels smothered in beets. Close by on little platters lay melt-in-your-mouth sides of beef, legs and all, and boiled pig's trotters with the most heavenly smell, beef sausages, and delicious pork ribs resting on the finest wheat rolls Roast thrushes ready for boiling flew round our mouths, begging us to eat them, spread out beneath myrtle trees and anemones. Overhead hung apples, the fairest of the fair to see, growing from nowhere. And the girls ... were ladling out cups full of fragrant dark wine through a funnel for those who wanted to drink. And when someone had eaten or drunk, immediately twice as much appeared all over again.⁵¹

A utopian ideal of feasting is similar to the food utopias of Homer, in which abundance is emphasized. The provision of delicacies in Pherecrates is explicitly attributed to “Wealth”, a favourite divinity in comic poets, revealing the sensitivity to the way economic power, rather than religious or aristocratic social caste systems, controls access to food. The availability of such luxuries to everyone who has enough money, without the need for the patronage of a patriarch like the Homeric kings, moves the symbolism of food from a class marker to a signal of individual lifestyle choices. Money, as well as the attendant dangers of robbery and fraud, also introduces to taste, pleasure and luxury a further association with danger.⁵²

Equally, Pherecrates’ banquet differs from Homer in the range of foods and specific accompaniments for each dish, as well as references to methods of cooking. While the Homeric utopia has ubiquitous fruit production without need for the harsh reality of farming, the classical Athenian utopia side-steps the agricultural necessities to present a picture of *haute cuisine* without cooks and kitchens, a sign of the elaborate menus of the day and the extent to which city dwellers were separated from the realities of farming. John Wilkins points out that the food in comic utopias desires to be eaten and presents itself ready-cooked; we may compare the relatively lengthy descriptions of roasting meat in Homer or the Cyclops’ preparation of his cannibalistic dinner.⁵³ Further, the expansive details of this utopian menu point to the monetization of food: while the abundance of the king’s feast in Homer is usually greater quantities or nicer portions of food, but without the need for hard labour in acquisition or production, the Attic utopia showcases the choice of luxuries without a need of money.

But what about taste? Even in such richly detailed passages, taste is not specifically mentioned. Wine has its typical fragrance, but it is not further qualified here. Nor do comic characters imagine “tasting” these foods, but swallowing them in ready-made mouthfuls, an extension of the relative Homeric silence on the physical act of eating, outside of the tongues of those blessed by the Muses. There are some references elsewhere to the pleasurable taste of foods, but the references are few and far between. In a fragment from Aeschylus’ lost play *Phineus*, about the prophet who was cursed to have continually re-appearing banquets snatched from him as he attempts to eat them, Phineus describes the harpies snatching the “first pleasure” of his mouth.⁵⁴ The term used is *charis*, a very important word in Greek for delight and pleasure, but interest in the sensual pleasures of food

tastes is not fully developed. If we turn to the metaphorical life of taste, we find a much richer history.

Experimenting with taste: the Homeric challenge

The positive and negative imagery of taste in Homer is distinct from the descriptions of food discussed above, and they lay the foundations for the treatment of taste in lyric and dramatic poets. In archaic epic, taste does not feature in descriptions of food, but as a metaphor in two separate contexts: for experimentation, usually in fatal contests on the battlefield, and for poetry. Poetic metaphors are complex signifiers of meaning and have been much studied. We can follow the accessible definition of metaphor offered by the classical art historian Gloria Ferrari, which itself draws on the work of Paul Ricoeur

Word and image do indeed come together in the trope of metaphor ... its capacity to “put before the eyes” the abstractions of logical discourse The definition of the trope adopted here is not the classical one, but that of metaphor as “interaction”. According to that definition, metaphor does not consist of exchanging one term for another, but in seeing one thing in terms of another. It is the process of drawing connections between two concepts in such a way that one (the image-laden one, the vehicle) provides a grid that organizes and guides our understanding of the other (the abstract one, the tenor).⁵⁵

In early Greek literature, taste is part of the discourse of food and eating, although unlike the separate visualization of food (fruit hanging on trees, set out on a table) and the physical action of eating (“they ate until they had thrown away their desire”), taste as a metaphor is flexible and adaptable to the context, either in relation to other physical actions or the implied sensation provided by good food, although even the metaphor is not used with reference to the physical activity of tasting food until the fifth century BCE.⁵⁶

Taste, unlike the physical consumption of food and its potentially transformative powers, is a threatening and immaterial experience in early epic. In the early sources, “taste” primarily expresses something done for the first time, which exposes the person to an extraordinary experience. In Homer, taste is frequently used of death in antagonistic speeches to opponents, so that it has an extended meaning of “try”. Homeric heroes threaten each other with the taste of blood, spears

and arrows. We see this first in the rousing speech to Achilles where Aeneas says, “Come on now, let’s quickly taste each other’s bronze spears.”⁵⁷ Such imagery builds on a notion of tasting as both experimental and irrevocable, and therefore potentially dangerous: like all forms of eating, once what is ingested has passed the barrier of the teeth, it cannot come back. As such, it has the power to alter the identity of the consumer, either through excessive consumption or magic. A frequent threat to or about opponents is the wish for them to be consumed by wild animals; a twist, perhaps, on the idea of the earth “swallowing” mortals in death, that we saw in the previous section. Taste is an experiment with uncertain outcome, and, appropriately, taste is used a metaphor for the hero’s confrontation of death. A particularly striking description is used of the suitors’ last dinner (*Odyssey* 20.390–4), which is “pleasurable (*hēdu*) and satisfying (*menoeikes*)”. The narrator clarifies that this tastiness comes from the quantity of animals slaughtered, before declaring that soon the suitors will have the most unpleasant of meals (*acharisteron*) in their deaths at the hands of Athena and Odysseus (*Odyssey* 20.390–4).

As we saw in the opening pages of this chapter, the Homeric metaphor of taste also arises far from the battlefield, in the context of poetic reflections on the art itself and its “sweet” beginnings from the lips of the Muses. However, in these contexts, the taste metaphor describes transference from the Muse to the singer and ultimately to his audience. The first reference to tasty poetry comes in the *Odyssey*, where the Muses give a “sweet song” to Demodocus,⁵⁸ the Phaeacian bard interpreted by many as representative of the rhapsodes who performed Homeric poetry throughout the Greek world.⁵⁹ The sweetness of poetry and poetic talent given to the poet are as transformative as the consumption of objects associated with irrevocable change and death; the difference is that poetry and poetic talent are given to be shared with others through incorporation into the individual. Spears or victory in battle bestow change on a single person but poetry has the power to transform its listeners as well as its singer. So, Hesiod’s Muses pour forth sweetness from their mouths, the opposite of swallowing: “weaving their voices, a sweet sound flows from their inexhaustible mouths”.⁶⁰ The taste of poetry in epic is always “sweet” and honeyed, the one taste routinely identified with pleasure in Homer.

The sinister undertones of epic battlefield taste metaphors, although continued to some extent in Attic drama,⁶¹ are transformed in lyric poetry, a related genre of performance poetry developed in the

Archaic period and predominately preserved for modern audiences in the extant works of Alcman, Sappho, Bacchylides and Pindar, whose works date from the seventh to fifth centuries BCE. Lyric poetry builds on epic themes and style, while also looking forward to the style and topics of tragedy. The elaborate metaphors and stylistic imagery employed by the lyric poets have been well studied, including the poets' representations of their interactions with Muses.⁶²

We take, for example, the imagery of taste in Pindar, a self-styled descendant of Homer.⁶³ By the early fifth century BCE, Pindar combines the consumption metaphor of "tasting battle" with the other context for tasting metaphors in Homer, the rhapsode's song. The trials and experiments of Homeric "tastes" of battle give way to more physical taste metaphors, which reflect the predominant theme of competition in lyric. Metaphors in Pindar have been well studied, and a recent commentary on *Nemean* 3 observes that Pindar only uses "taste" metaphorically, with a primary meaning of "to taste the sweets of, to enjoy", but also of unpleasant experiences in which case, "the *ground* of the metaphor is simply someone who tastes something, in a way experiences it, the *suppressed tenor* being 'to experience, to feel'".⁶⁴ For instance, Pindar describes athletes as "tasting the crowns of victory", or tasting "excellence".⁶⁵ As important as this image is for establishing the supremacy of the poet's patron and his athletic achievements, it also illustrates Pindar's individual poetic art. The poet frequently reinvents the Homeric metaphor of musical sweetness with a more emphatic visualization of possession and consumption. He describes his heart "tasting songs", a euphemism for composing poetry (*Isthmian* 5.20), as well as "drinking" musical inspiration (*Olympian* 6.86), or "pouring out nectar" (*Olympian* 7.7; see also *Pythian* 1.90), to name only a few.⁶⁶ He frequently describes the gift of poetry bequeathed by the Muses as "honey-sweet" and later poets embrace the idea of poetry as honey carried by poets, who are assimilated to bees.⁶⁷ The Muse's sensual caress as she transfers poetry from her lips to those of the poet is now displaced by the honeyed product itself. Moreover, the Homeric transmission of the gifts of the Muses like sweet foods is amplified in lyric poetry, where such imagery now describes acts of possession, rather than the more moderate images of transference in epic. As this taste metaphor becomes ingrained in literary tropes of the period, it becomes less about the poetic power of the Muse to bestow her sweet songs, and more about the poet as possessor of power and thus, victory.

This more nuanced notion of taste as possession or acquisition

seems to have become fully established in literary parlance by the mid-fifth century, and is not confined to poetry. The historian Herodotus, writing roughly fifty years after Pindar, tells of the Lydian Sandanis who advises his king Croesus against an ill-advised attempt to conquer Persia by referring to their foodways.

Further, they do not use wine, but drink water, have no figs to eat, or anything else that is good. Now if you conquer them, of what will you deprive them, since they have nothing? But if on the other hand you are conquered, then look how many good things you will lose; for once they have tasted of our blessings they will cling so tightly to them that nothing will pry them away.⁶⁸

From the Lydian speaker's perspective, the cultural deprivation of the Persians is encapsulated by their lack of wine and figs, essential staples of the Mediterranean diet. The practical point about the absence of these foods leads to a metaphorical attempt by the Persians to acquire the "blessings" of the Lydians. Just as Pindar's athletes savour and therefore embody victory, these foreign foes are imagined as becoming possessors of civilized Lydian culture, including their diet, through taste. Here the "tastes" refer not to a single concrete experience, such as battle or song, but instead to the abstract notion of cultural assimilation, with the result that the physical action of eating food is more prominent in this metaphor than in its earlier Homeric incarnation. The Lydian "blessings" of figs and wine, however, also are metonyms for the whole of Lydian culture. Thus, we see the twofold Homeric uses of taste metaphors: the dangerous tastes of the battlefield and the sweet pleasures of cultural transmission are combined in this representation of culture clash between the Lydians and Persians. But what is striking here is that the tastes in this context are anonymously experienced by a group of people rather than being the individualized experience of a combatant or rhapsode. The sharing and distribution of food is usually depicted as a joyous occasion and taste in this context is highly individualized, a "one-off" experience and as such can express individual identity. By contrast, eating is usually a group experience and therefore thought to be characteristic of ethnicity. In this respect, cultural transference is more akin to feasting, which is always a social act. As Homeric taste metaphors are transplanted into a world where cultures are distinguished by their foods, care must be taken both to preserve individual and collective identity from outside influence and to embrace the unknown.⁶⁹ It is in

the interface between cultures that dining and tasting are finally brought together.

Laughing at taste: the comic afterlife of the Homeric challenge

The afterlife of Homeric taste metaphors are not entirely sinister or poetic. More positive and light-hearted references develop as well. In the hands of fifth-century BCE verse and prose authors, the Homeric metaphor of taste as a unique experience develops to reflect a consumer culture in which social class, morals and education can be expressed through diet, which is no longer an exclusively individual experience, and often in humorous contexts. Nowhere is this more clear than in the literary metaphors of taste found in Attic comedy, where taste becomes one of the most predominant metaphors.⁷⁰ By the end of the fifth century BCE, dramatic performances of comedy and tragedy were well established in Athenian festivals for Dionysus, along with relatively widespread circulation of poetry and prose works as written texts. The notion of possession continues as the antagonistic goal of the poet, but can also be transposed onto his audience, not just as listeners in the Homeric or Pindaric mode, but also as owners of books.⁷¹ This increasingly literary culture impels the metaphor of “sweet” poetry to expand, while other factors promote the use of food to express identity. As the Greek world developed trade links with the East in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE and conflicts among Greek cities began to proliferate in the centuries that followed, literary descriptions of food also changed, often highlighting distinctions between luxurious, often imported, tasty accompaniments and the basic homegrown staples necessary for survival. In Athens, for example, the democratic city becomes the patron of feasts and its valued citizens can be identified by good eating habits, while the corruption of the opponents of the democracy is depicted with bad eating habits or an immoderate appetite for luxury foods.⁷² As food importation, urbanization and intra-state and international warfare increase, the world market created after the Persian wars brought different foods into the Athenian agora while at the same time tightening the conceptualization of moderate and immoderate eating, which at this point began to be expressed in terms of personal choice of foods, that is, “taste”. Building on the earlier literary use of eating to express cultural identity, a discourse was created of luxury and

delicacy, which expanded metaphors of taste to express judgments not only about individual lifestyle choice, but also about social mores. Food habits in literary contexts can frequently illustrate the structuralist distinction between traditional healthy values and corrupting foreign influences, but they also exemplify agonistic geopolitical posturing between Greek cities. Moreover, the shift towards a concept of “taste” as a personal choice, which earlier literature had mostly lacked, signals a development in class distinctions that cannot be overestimated.

This chapter will conclude with a brief discussion of the late fifth-century BCE comic depictions of taste and the ways that the Homeric model gives way to a concept of eating as a social stereotype.

Building on both the contemporary class/economic significance of food choices and the literary tradition of “honeyed” music, comic poets identify themselves as producers of a food for their audiences to consume and as saviours of their homeland through their poetry, while they denigrate the work of their opponents in the opposite fashion.⁷³ The social and cultural implications of abundance and deprivation in Homer are among those that playwrights adapted to the changing political climate. The same indications of delight in a shared feast or disgust with inappropriate eating are mapped on to the comic poet’s self-adopted role of social commentator. The good king of Homer, who provides for his subjects and guests, is twisted in the hands of the comic commentator. Here the playwright represents contemporary politicians excluded from a feast hosted by a poor man or mocks these self-styled “kings” of the city for their excessive food consumption. Both portrayals are meant to be symptomatic of political corruption. Most comic plays conclude with the hero, usually a downtrodden little guy, orchestrating a symbolic feast to mark the establishment of a harmonious, thriving community of his own choice.⁷⁴ Notably, the guest list often includes the audience. For instance, the chorus leader in Aristophanes’ satire of Socrates, *Clouds*, speaks to the audience thus:

Spectators, I will speak the truth to you frankly, so help me Dionysus, the god who reared me. So may I win the prize and be thought sage, I took you for intelligent theatergoers and this for the most sophisticated of my comedies; that is why I thought you deserved to be the first to savor it, a play that cost me very hard work.⁷⁵

The verb “savour” (*anageuō*) is a compound of the verb *geuō*, discussed above. However, we see here that “taste” has retained some of its original metaphorical meaning of “threat to a rival to try something” as well as its meta-poetic reference to poetic inspiration in the sweetness metaphors for music and their implicit concept of taste. The chorus leader, here a mouthpiece for the poet, describes himself as the provider of a food, combining the Homeric role of the good king with that of the Muses, since his food is poetry. His audience will taste his play, with all of the transformative and possessive implications of this metaphor. Other descriptions emphasize the control of the poet over musical inspiration, as already in Pindar, which is still imagined as transferred through the mouth as if food, but without the divine origin. Aristophanes’ joke about his rival poet Phrynichus gives a nice example from the late fifth century:

Just like a bee,
Phrynichus ate the eternal fruit of ambrosial music
To bring forth his sweet song.⁷⁶

Whereas the epic rhapsode is given sweet song by the Muses, by the time of the fifth-century BCE lyric and dramatic poets, the musician is free to eat of his own volition. The taste implications remain in the “sweetness” of the song, but the act is physical and possessive. The poet’s audience, while remaining the beneficiaries of his music, like the Muses, becomes side-lined in the light of individual artistic control. This is only one example among many in Aristophanes where we can see the expansion both of feasting generally and also of tasting particularly into an all-encompassing metaphor for literary production and the importance of poetry in a harmonious, well-ordered community. Although most cultures express identity through particular food customs, the emphasis on food in comic drama is unique to Greece.⁷⁷ In addition to expressing concerns about contemporary politics, comic poets also highlight social fault lines related to gender dynamics and ethical questions of balancing individual and group needs through a full range of food, eating and taste analogies. While expressions like “in good taste” cannot be found, various criticisms are expressed through eating metaphors and references to food choices, costs and pleasurable dinners.

The overall effect of such an Athenianization of a long-developed literary metaphor of “taste” has been described by Clements in the first volume of the “Senses in Antiquity” series as “shock poetics”,

since it merges sensory experiences that ought to be distinct. His foremost example is the criss-cross of sight and smell in a description of the chorus in Aristophanes' political satire, *Knights*, in which the sausage-seller describes the Council, the governing body of Athens, upon hearing slanderous allegations:

as they were hearing this, the whole Council became full of
false-orach,
looked mustard and knit its brows.⁷⁸

Clements gives several examples from Aristophanes combining vision and taste, such as “look savoury-taste”, “look cress”, “look fig-juice”, “look oregano” and “look a savoury sauce”.⁷⁹ Clements concludes that the sensory experiences of looking, tasting, smelling are conceptually linked so that “the logic of a mustard glance lies in the poet’s use of the capacity of marked foods to instantiate, as focal exemplars of the sensation-affect at its centre, all the embodied qualities of (mustard) in its most immediate and concrete form”.⁸⁰ Clements is analysing the ancient discourse of sensory hierarchies and the philosophical tendency to undermine smell and taste. For our discussion, we can point to his numerous examples of specific tastes described in Aristophanes, and add the way emotions and perspectives are expressed with taste. Xanthias, the pseudo-heroic slave speaks of “looking oregano” in a mock-heroic battle. Underlying such descriptions is not only the multisensory poetic shock discussed by Clements, but also the tradition of taste metaphors coming from Homer’s battlefields through the lyric gaze: taste is to possess, but also to transfer. Clements concludes that Xanthias’ boast to “look oregano” means that he will send forth battle-stirring looks in the guise of Heracles the hero being comically emulated in this scene: “the effect of this boast is to invite the audience to reflect upon the continuity of experience between what is felt in the context of one sensory exchange ... with what is experienced in another”.⁸¹ Thus, we see Xanthias as the Aristophanic mouthpiece inviting his audience as much as his opponent to partake of Homeric danger and experimentation.

Aristophanes also offers us a synthesis of the literary taste metaphors with food and feasting in his political satire, *Wasps* (422 BCE). This comedy transforms these two Homeric *topoi* into a contemporary political guise by shifting our attention away from the king’s feast to the citizen’s national and ethical food choices.⁸²

Aristophanes, in this play, mocks a contemporary leading politician, Cleon, through a caricature of a father, LoveCleon, whose son, LoatheCleon, takes desperate measures to keep his obsessive father out of the juror box.⁸³ Although jury service, superficially, is unconnected to food, jokes framed in terms of eating proliferate throughout the play. From the first choral ode, Aristophanes employs a food-based commentary in describing the actions of his characters. LoveCleon, under the surveillance of guards acting on the orders of his son, describes his resistance to his son's efforts with a proverb, "you're trying to cook a stone" (280), and is encouraged "don't eat yourself up" (286–7), while threats are made to his guards to "eat their hearts out" (374). The old man describes himself as "turning into runny whey" to escape (353), while his guards watch him as if "holding skewers" (363). Even a defendant on trial is threatened with cooking as a metaphor for meeting justice (290). Scholars have noted the importance of these metaphors for comedic effect, but what is central to our study is the way they exemplify the amalgamation of the Homeric consumption motif and musical metaphor.

The comic actors express rivalry through "eat your heart out" metaphors, which have moved from the battlefield of Homeric heroism to poetic production. These comic plays were performed at annual competitions hosted by the city; Athenian public funds paid for the artists and actors, provided prizes for the victors and probably also free entry to the competitions as well. In this context, patriotic boasting is especially prominent, as is the playwright's own self-promotion and vilification of rival poets. The whole premise of *Wasps* is cross-generational political conflict, most blatantly expressed in the names Loathe- and Love-Cleon. In *Wasps*, the son's guards could have fortified themselves by "eating Philocles' songs" (462), an example of the frequent antagonistic description of comic plays as food. Later in the third choral ode, the chorus leader describes for the audience how Aristophanes has been helping them by "slipping into other men's bellies and making lots of comic material pour out",⁸⁴ a comic turn on the honeyed gifts of the Muses poured into the mouths of poets. Throughout Aristophanes' comedies, people's eating habits reflect their sense of morality and usefulness to their community.

These general eating metaphors become more pointed when referring to rich and poor. The jurors, who make up the chorus of wasps, use their jury payments for barley-meal and firewood; it does not stretch far enough for the luxurious figs requested by one of their sons (300–3). LoveCleon warns that charges of treachery are as

prevalent as cheap food like sardines and sprats: foods that their purveyors interpret as illustrations of the buyer's political inclinations (488–99). The chorus gets in on the action too, describing LoveCleon's troubles in terms of an elaborate meal with soup and salad courses (480), before pointing out that this description comes from a "stock of ten-gallon metaphors" (481). As we saw above in the comic utopia described by Pherecrates, the emphasis is on choices of foods and the hierarchy of socio-economic status expressed in access to food. The Homeric threat of "taste" is carried to an extreme in which banter is construed in terms of foods, and although the verb "taste" found in epic and lyric metaphors is not used in any of these examples, the emphasis on food choice embeds this physical sensation. In other words, in earlier poetry, eating is an important group activity, while taste is only metaphorical; typical of Aristophanes, these tropes have been reversed: everyone tastes, but the Homeric king's banquet has become a literalized metaphor of ingesting political status.

Conclusion

Outside of Attic comedy and the specialist treatises on food and dining that survive in fragments, Archaic and Classical Greek writers tend to describe eating habits rather than the sensory experience – "taste" – of what is actually eaten, and from Homer onwards such habits are positive or negative expressions of the social, cultural and ethnic identity of the eater. Positive representation of different groups is often synopsized in descriptions of a shared feast of roasted meat and wine or a leader's ability to provide abundant food, while the absence or perversion of feasting are hallmarks of the foreign, unjust and uncivilized. In early literature, this distinction is not usually expressed metaphorically, but rather in the depictions of wild groups of raw-eaters as opposed to the luxurious banquets of roasted meat enjoyed by god-fearing, law-abiding Greeks.⁸⁵ So, the earliest poets prioritize food as a primary expression of social and cultural identity, but in a polarized model of good eating and bad eating and good foods and bad foods. Guests of honour are given presents of food by their host, but their identity is expressed through the foods presented to them rather than the other way around.

The pleasures associated with food and the wealth and power it signifies is one of the most frequent, even predominant, themes in the

archaic epics. However, the pleasures associated with food are not described in terms of taste, even though generic phrases such as “sweet wine” are frequent and the beauty of a flourishing, fertile farm is a characteristic of places favoured or inhabited by gods in Homer’s *Odyssey*. An indication of the conceptual differentiation of food provided at feasts or food needed for survival and the picture of “luxuriant grapes” hanging on trees can be seen in the absence of the latter from the plates of Homeric diners. Although Odysseus travels to places where the fecundity of the land is described in vivid detail, the meals of meat and wine are always described in the same formulaic language. Epic diners are not described as choosing or differentiating among foods, nor do the tempting fruits in the panoramic gardens explicitly make their way to the dining table. There are many thematic and stylistic reasons underlying the relatively bland description of foods eaten, as opposed to the great pleasure taken in the assembled company, the king’s generous provision or, most of all, the singer’s performance in accompaniment to the meal. Put simply, the Homeric epics avoid many mundane practical details, there is a general avoidance of agricultural deities in preference to those associated with music, battle and kingship, and the emphasis on musical accompaniment at the feasts is an early and particularly moving example of artistic self-representation and self-promotion. However, there is also a subtle but important thematic association of ingestion and transformation or death: the only specific part of Odysseus’ travels described in the proem of this most famous poem is the consumption of the Cattle of the Sun which caused the deaths of his crew.⁸⁶ Part of this pessimism regarding food is the threat of starvation which probably coloured all ancient Greek experiences of food on some level, as it does for any subsistence agricultural community. Indeed, the threat of starvation is a large focus of the *Odyssey* and perhaps the main focus of the roughly contemporary Hesiodic farming poem, *Works and Days*.

In literary terms, a very interesting metaphor of taste develops in the Homeric poems, which is related to this picture of food but only indirectly. Homeric heroes threaten their opponents with “tastes” of blood and spears, a metaphor carried through into fifth-century tragedy. In these contexts, taste is an unpredictable, primary experience with life-changing consequences, and one which is presented by one rival to another as a “choice”. Like the ingestion of food and the potential transformation of the consumer, the taste of battle is a choice with drastic consequences. The metaphorical action

of “taste” is imagined as the experience of choice: warriors can taste battle or death, which is to say they can choose to fight bravely. The notion of taste builds on the belief that eating and food habits reveal the individual, and in doing so, the concept links the intertwined notion of sustenance and destruction.

Alongside this military metaphor lies a charming and highly influential picture of singers ingesting divine inspiration for their music through their mouths, music which is transposed by the divine Muses and is frequently described as “sweet” and compared to honey. Like the battlefield metaphor, the inward experience of poetic inspiration is likened to ingestion and its outward effect on the listening audience, rather than the battlefield opponent, creates a literary trope that is both proud and antagonistic. Those who offer a taste of their spear speak of their pre-eminence over their enemy, while those singers having drunk from the Muses boast of their divine musical power.

While early epic metaphors of taste lay the foundation for the unique and experimental experience of the individual, it is the socio-economic developments that launch taste as a ubiquitous expression of cultural identity. As poetry expands from the extremely long narrative epics to shorter performative poems covering a range of themes in different, usually competitive, contexts, the proud boast of taste is frequently evoked of both artistic endeavour and victory over rival poets, an amalgamation of the different Homeric taste metaphors. There is a large-scale, gradual development of an international food market available to rich Athenians and the subsequent professionalization of cuisine which enhances this gradual development of food taste metaphors, culminating in the comic depictions of a world – even a Homeric world – structured by food and eating, as can be seen in [Chapter 4](#). The Homeric picture of bounty and metaphorical concept of choice, expressed as “taste”, becomes for the political satirist Aristophanes a microcosm of his society and its problems, played out in references to what and how people eat, including the description of his own poetry as food for his audience. Thus, we see that the concept of taste always sits between metaphor and experience for archaic and classical poets, in which a concept of “you are what you eat” develops from the honey-sweet gifts of the Muses to the mustard glances of a comic “hero”.⁸⁷

¹Relevant and accessible studies on this topic are Davidson (1997), Wilkins (2000) and Wilkins *et al.* (1995).

- 2Goody (1982: 102) made a very influential observation about the way class stratification was seen through the uniquely Greek development of a literature of *haute cuisine*. Wilkins (2000) identifies the poetic interest in food as an impetus for the professionalization of cuisine observed by Goody. Only after the popularization of food as a topic in comedy do literary treatises on food and cooking appear. Dalby (1996) gives a historical argument for the development of *haute cuisine* under the influence of imported foods after the campaigns of Alexander. Recent surveys of food in Greek literature can be found in essays in Wilkins & Nadeau (2015).
- 3See, for example Węcowski (2014) and Wilkins & Nadeau (2015). The symposium can be clearly distinguished from the material under discussion here in a variety of ways, most importantly the practice of drinking in isolation from eating.
- 4P-IE **ǵeus-* Latin *gusto*, NE choose, Greek *geuomai*, Sanskrit *juṣáte*. According to Mallory & Adams (2006: 255–6) “the concept of ‘taste’ was closely bound to ideas of ‘enjoy, please’ and there are two terms in Proto-Indo-European for this. The root **ǵeus* is widespread and the semantics range from ‘taste’ to ‘test’ to ‘that which is pleasing’.” For further discussion see Gowers (Chapter 5).
- 5For example, Alcinous’ dinner invitation runs thus “When you’ve all tied your oars well to the oarlocks, come ashore. Then afterward, come to my house and have a quick dinner, and I will provide well for all Let no one decline” (Homer, *Odyssey* 8.37–43), and Odysseus’ refusal to dine with Circe until his companions have been freed, *Odyssey* 10.372–87. All references to *Odyssey* and *Iliad* throughout are to Homer.
- 6*Odyssey* 9.345–62; ἦσατο δ’ αἰνῶς/ ἦδὺ ποτὸν πίνων, “he was terribly pleased, drinking the sweet wine”, 9.353–4.
- 7The sweetness of the Muses and epic song has been well studied; see Ford (1992: 72–82), Liebert (2010: 97–8) with bibliography and Hunter (2014: 282–315) on the ancient commentary on early poetry as “sweet”.
- 8See, for example, *Iliad* 7.313–23, *Odyssey* 8.58–72; cf. Herodotus, *Histories* 2.18.2 on dietary laws among the Egyptians.
- 9See, for example, *Iliad* 11.630; Davidson (1997: 21–35) outlines the Athenian perception of *opson*, charting its development from a general word for fish into an Athenian marker for immoderate luxury.
- 10*Iliad* 1.469 and *passim*, including *Odyssey* 1.150 below. For discussion of the typical Homeric feast, see Hitch (2009: 11–60).
- 11*Iliad* 11.551: κρείων ἐπατίζων.
- 12*Odyssey* 7.215–16. See Rudolph (Chapter 2) on the philosophical notion that taste distinguishes humans from animals. See also Whitehead (2002) on ἀδηφαγία (usually translated “gluttony”) as a term from horse-rearing that enters into metaphors about human consumption. He also suggests that shrines dedicated to the personified ἀδηφαγία are likely to be sites dedicated to “Plenty to Eat”.
- 13Ludwig (2002: 125): “Homeric eros seems to mean mere desire of any kind, for any object or aim, no matter how mundane, no matter how intense or lacking in intensity.”
- 14On the erotic association of food and sex in later Greek poetry, see Telò (Chapter 4). Kirk (1985: 9–11) describes the “decarnalization” of the Homeric world in comparison with Near Eastern epics. cf. Griffin (1980: 187–8) and below.
- 15See *Iliad* 1.576, 11.624–43; *Odyssey* 18.404.
- 16See *Odyssey* 2.55–79.
- 17Banquets of the gods: e.g. *Iliad* 1.597–604; mythical accounts of eternal feasting of the blessed in Hades, Plato, *Republic* 363d.

- 18Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.39 makes a similar point about the omission of fish and fruit from the Homeric diet.
- 19All translations of the *Odyssey* are taken from Lattimore (1967).
- 20Dalby (1995: 277) points out that no one in Homer eats the fruits as described in Alcinous' garden, a further example of the emphasis on abundance rather than choice. The Cyclops compares Odysseus' wine to ambrosia and nectar, the food of the gods, in contrast to the wine produced automatically on his island, *Odyssey* 9.357–9: “since for Cyclopes the grain-giving earth bears clusters of grapes / for wine, and Zeus' rain makes them grow for them, / but this is like a bit of ambrosia and nectar!”. In this context, the implicit pleasures of the foreign wine's taste are distinguished from the god given abundance of his local wine.
- 21Phaeacian feasts: sheep, pigs and oxen, *Odyssey* 8.59–72; dinner for Odysseus from the storeroom, 7.175–6; Alcinous describes the gods feasting on hecatombs alongside the Phaeacians, 7.201–3. Segal (1994a: 26–8) discusses the descriptions of the Phaeacians and suitors taking pleasure (*terpsis*) in feasting and music, see also below.
- 22*Odyssey* 1.139–52.
- 23Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.8f: “For (Homer) calculated that desires and pleasures are very powerful, and those that involve food and drink are the most basic and deeply ingrained and that people who have lived in a consistently frugal manner are orderly and self-disciplined in other aspects of their lives as well.” Trans. Olson (2012: 47).
- 24For further discussion of taste in the Roman imperial period, see Paulas ([Chapter 12](#)). Indeed, part of the joke in Matro (see Telò, [Chapter 4](#)) may be that the author is introducing just such titillating delicacies back into a Homeric context where they are obviously absent.
- 25*Odyssey* 11.588–92.
- 26See the description of Alcinous' garden above. ἀγλαόκαρποι (“splendid-fruited”) is a rare poetic word also found in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* of Demeter (4) and olive trees (23). Like “luxuriant” (*tēlethaō*), the emphasis is on growth.
- 27*Odyssey* 5.165–6: αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ σῖτον καὶ ὕδωρ καὶ οἶνον ἐρυθρόν/ ἐνθήσω μενοεικέ', ἃ κέν τοι λιμὸν ἐρύκοι. Compare also the scant two-verse description of his meal before departure (5.196–7): “and the nymph laid all kind of food beside him, to eat and drink, such kinds as mortal men eat”.
- 28*Odyssey* 9.162 (and *passim*): ἤμεθα δαινύμενοι κρέα τ' ἄσπετα καὶ μέθυ ἡδύ: “we sat feasting on abundant meat and sweet wine”; *Iliad* 1.40 (and *passim*) πλόνα μηρία: “fat thigh bones”.
- 29See Mallory & Adams (2006: 336) on the semantics of “sweet” as “what is pleasing to the senses” (ἡδύς). See, for example, sweet (ἡδύς) wine at *Odyssey* 2.350 and its sweet smell at 9.210. The milk of Libyan sheep is also sweet (γλυκύς, *Odyssey* 4.88), an adjective applied to wine, water, honey, figs and a range of activities such as laughing, sleeping and singing (e.g. *Iliad* 2.270, 4.131). Odysseus' wine “pleases” (ἥσατο δ' αἰνῶς) the Cyclops at *Odyssey* 9.353: the verb ἡδομαι “take pleasure” is only found here in Homer. The food of the gods given to the prophetic bee-maidens described by Apollo in the *Homeric Hymn to Mercury* is “sweet” (θεῶν ἡδεῖαν ἐδωδήν, 4.564). See Telò ([Chapter 4](#)) on sweetness as a sexual metaphor and Totelin ([Chapter 3](#)) on honey in Greek medicine.
- 30See *Odyssey* 9.557, 10.184, 468, 477, 12.30; cf. “food and sweet wine” at 17.533.
- 31See Ford (1992: 60–1) and Segal (1994a: 114–20), who notes the formulaic description of song as an “accompaniment to feasting” (ἀναθήματα δαιτός, p. 117); representative discussions of epic performance and music in the *Odyssey*

can be found in Scodel (2009: 65–89) and Murray (2008). The “pleasure” of listening to song is described in a full range of pleasure words, often – but not exclusively – *charis*. Robb (1994: 162–3) offers a summary of the emotional pleasure for audiences described by Plato; see Murray (1996: 7, 2002: 45) for further references and bibliography.

32*Odyssey* 9.6–11.

33See the introduction to this volume for more on the role of the tongue.

34On Roman taste metaphors, see Gowers (Chapter 5).

35That such treats are then passed from the singers to the banqueters (and subsequently to us, the audience) implies a related, but separate connection.

36See Warren (Chapter 6) on divine consumption and the Persephone myth and Clements (2015).

37*Odyssey* 5.194–9.

38This absence is despite the presence of Dionysus as a divinity in the Linear B tables from Pylos and Chania dated to c. 1250 BCE (see *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th edn, s.v. Dionysus and bibliography) and evidence of the worship of Demeter at Eleusis at least as early as the Mycenaean period, on which see Cosmopoulos (2015).

39Vernant (1989: 60–1) and *passim* on the complex presentation of food and gods in Hesiod; see e.g. Kearns (2004: 61) on the absence of Demeter and Dionysus.

40The lotus eaters: *Odyssey* 9.94–7. The shades of the dead drink blood in order to speak to the living: *Odyssey* 11.95–6.

41Circe makes a drink with accoutrement similar to Hecamede, but adds a drug to take away memory before changing the men into pigs, *Odyssey* 10.233–8 and 366–87. Cf. Plato, *Republic* 865d, where transformation into wolves occurs by eating human flesh. On eating in the *Odyssey*, see Vidal-Naquet ([1981] 1986).

42Death as “swallowing”: *Iliad* 4.182, 6.282, 8.150. Zeus swallows Metis to assume her power, *Theogony* 889–91. More generally, as a metaphor for destruction: the suitors of Odysseus’ wife “devour” his property, *Odyssey* 14.92 and *passim*. Achilles wishes he could eat the raw heart of his enemy Hector at *Iliad* 22.347; cf. 22.42–3. Later, in fourth-century BCE oratory, Aeschines accuses Timarchus of “eating up” his ancestral estate (πολλὴν γὰρ πάνυ κατέλπιεν ὁ πατὴρ αὐτῷ οὐσίαν, ἣν οὗτος κατεδήδοκεν, 42.3–4).

43See anecdotes from Attic comedy in Davidson (1997: 209).

44See Bradley (2015) for an in-depth study of smell and the ancient senses; see also Rudolph’s introduction to this volume.

45*Odyssey* 12.36; *Homeric Hymn to Mercury* 4.132. In Aristophanes’ *Birds* and *Peace*, such distinctions are abandoned when Hermes prefers eating meat to the smells of sacrifice. See Wilkins (2000: 21, 47, 94).

46*Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 13.

47On raw eating, including milk, which was not a part of the Greek diet, see also Herodotus 4.186.3. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus will know his destination when he reaches a place where men do not eat salt (11.122–3). Kilgour (1990: 23): “To eat in a country is potentially to be eaten by it, to enter into a false identification by being absorbed by a foreign culture.”

48Later authors continue this use of food as a cultural marker: Herodotus refers to methods of cooking and eating as one of the essential identifiers of different ethnic groups in his descriptions of the Egyptians (2.18) and the Scythians (4.62).

49Plato, *Republic* 404b–e, where discussion of the contrast between the simple Homeric diet and contemporary luxuries leads to a label of “licentiousness” (ἀκολασία) for the latter; cf. 559a–561e and Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.19.13. See Dalby (1995: 276) and Davidson (1997: 13) for summaries of the

ancient commentary on Homeric diet.

50 See also Livarda (Chapter 10).

51 Pherecrates, *Miners*, fr. 113 (Koch) = Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 268d–269c; trans. Storey. Cf. Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market* (1865).

52 Davidson (1997).

53 Wilkins (2000: 113).

54 Aeschylus, fr. 258 Sommerstein: στόματος ἐν πρώτῃ χαρῇ.

55 Ferrari (1997: 5). See also Clements (2013), discussed below, who gives summary definitions of metaphor, including Aristotle's "classical" definition.

56 For example, Aeschylus fr. 29 Sommerstein has Glaucus "tasting the grass of eternal life" (γεύομαι πως τῆς αἰζώου πόας), while in the *Agamemnon* Cassandra mourns the image of the children of Thyestes, whose flesh their father "tasted" (ὦν πατὴρ ἐγεύσατο, 1222). Thucydides describes the deaths of birds who "tasted" the bodies of plague victims (2.50) and cannibalism among the Potidaeans (2.70). See also Aesop, Fable 114b; Pindar, *Nemean* 7.85–6; Euripides *Iphigenia in Aulis* 243, *Ion* 1203 and *Cyclops* 149, 155, 559 (the meaning here is literally "taste" or "take a little sip"; this is the first use of γεύω with liquids).

57 *Iliad* 20.257–8: ἀλλ' ἄγε θᾶσσον / γευσόμεθ' ἀλλήλων χαλκήρεσιν ἐγχείησιν. See also *Iliad* 21.60; *Odyssey* 7.413; 21.98.

58 *Odyssey* 8.64: ἦδεῖαν αἰοιδῆν.

59 The question about Homer's identity, posed to the Deliades as "who is the sweetest of singers" (*Homeric Hymn to Apollo* 169), is similar. Demodocus and rhapsodic performance has been frequently discussed: a handy summary can be found in Burgess (2004).

60 Hesiod, *Theogony* 39–40: φωνῇ ὁμηρεῦσαι, τῶν δ' ἀκάματος ῥέει αὐδῇ/ ἐκ στομάτων ἦδεῖα; cf. 83–4.

61 Fifth-century BCE tragic plays continue these threatening tastes, especially in Euripides, who refers to the "taste of bitter pains" (*Alcestis* 1069) and "taste of evils" (*Hecuba* 375) and Sophocles, where the Furies are called upon to "taste the army" (*Ajax* 844).

62 Relevant and accessible surveys of the changing perceptions of the Muses in Greek poetry can be found in Spentzou and Fowler (2002); particularly relevant on the Muses from Homer to fifth-century dramatists, is the essay by Lada-Richards (2002).

63 Pindar is not representative of the lyric "genre", but is the most accessible of the lyric poets and was extremely influential on and influenced by Athenian poets: see a recent essay by Kurke (2016) and Nagy (1990) for an accessible and detailed study of Homer, Pindar and Athens.

64 Pfeijffer (1999) 333. He gives several examples of both metaphors in Pindar, with brief reference to the Homeric metaphor, which he finds to be "ironical".

65 Pindar, *Isthmian* 1.21–2: γεύόμενοι στεφάνων/ νικαφόρων; Pindar *Nemean* 3.42. Pfeijffer (1999) 333 gives other examples, including *Pythian* 9.35, 10.5–7, *Nemean* 7.87–8, *Isthmian* 1.18–21.

66 On metaphors in Pindar generally, as well as his self-representation, an accessible and important study is Lefkowitz (1991) 42 and *passim*.

67 See, for example, Pindar, *Olympian* 5.1, 6.91, 7.9, 9.80.

68 Herodotus, *Histories* 1.71.3, trans. Godley. Other examples in Herodotus: "taste freedom" (6.5.6); "taste the sweetness of life" (7.46.4).

69 There are similar descriptions of group tasting in Plato, who discusses food choices and eating habits in feasting contexts, but also in metaphors relating taste to knowledge and learning. For example, Plato describes the corruption of badly educated men as beginning when they first "taste the honey of the

drones” (*Republic* 559d: γεύσεται κηφῆνων μέλιτος, the drones are men devoted to immoderate and corrupting pleasures). In a more positive context, Plato imagines children “tasting” laws (*Laws* 752c3). Like the Lydian’s speech in Herodotus, taste is the initial exposure to something pleasurable which leads to a permanent change. Although this seems to be a throwback to the Homeric battlefield metaphor, it is “modernized” in Plato as an anonymous group activity. For more on Plato, see Rudolph’s introduction to this volume and [Chapter 2](#).

- 70I cannot do justice to the breadth of taste and food imagery found in Greek comedy in this short survey. See Henderson (1991); Dobrov (1997); Davidson (1997); Wilkins (2000) for an overview of Greek comic language, metaphor and its relation to food.
- 71The complex topic of rival poetics and the burgeoning “book culture” in late fifth-century BCE Athens has been much discussed: see e.g. the essays in Yunis (2003).
- 72Gluttony is one of the most vilified vices, listed alongside impiety, crime, lust and laziness by Xenophon (*Memorabilia* 1.2.2). On Athens as provider of feasts for its citizens, see “Old Oligarch”, *Constitution of the Athenians* 2.9.
- 73On poetry as food, Wilkins gives a synopsis (2000: 98–102). Although the focus in this chapter has been on Athens, more can be done on “food culture” outside of Attica. See Davidson (1997: 4–5), who discusses the earlier development of cookbooks and food culture in the Greek cities in Sicily and southern Italy, for which we have only fragmentary and anecdotal evidence. A recent survey on food in Greek literature is provided by Hunter and Koukouzia (2015).
- 74See, for example, Aristophanes, *Acharnians*, *Peace*, *Birds*. On the merger of dramatic banquet and spectators’ own feasting, see Wilkins (2000: 141–2).
- 75Aristophanes, *Clouds* 519–25, trans. Henderson (1998: 83).
- 76Aristophanes, *Birds* 748–50; cf. Plato *Ion* 534a–b. References in which poets compare themselves or other poets to bees and poetic production to feeding on or carrying honey are given by Crane (1987: 402), who points out that part of the draw may be in the knowledge that, unlike the diverse diet of most animals, bees feed only on honey.
- 77Wilkins (2000).
- 78Clements (2013: 95).
- 79Aristophanes, *Acharnians* 253–4, *Wasps* 455, *Peace* 1184, *Frogs* 603, *Ecclesiazusae* 292; cited and translated by Clements (2013: 75).
- 80Clements (2013: 87).
- 81Clements (2013: 87).
- 82Similar examples can be found throughout Aristophanes, and the topic of food in Attic comedy, as we have seen, has been well studied, so I will provide only a few brief examples relevant to the development of the Homeric metaphors.
- 83Translations are those of Henderson (1998). An accessible introduction to this play and its themes is Sidwell (2009).
- 84Aristophanes, *Wasps* 1020: εἰς ἀλλοτρίας γαστέρας ἐνδὺς κωμῳδικὰ πολλὰ χέασθαι.
- 85Further discussion of the opposition between raw and cooked can be found in MacKinnon ([Chapter 9](#)) and Caseau ([Chapter 13](#)).
- 86*Odyssey* 1.6–9.
- 87The author wishes to thank the Leverhulme Trust for their generous support during the writing of this chapter and the editor and anonymous readers for their comments.

Tastes of reality

Epistemology and the senses in ancient philosophy

Kelli C. Rudolph

Ancient Greek philosophers, like the physicians that Totelin, Baker, Boulay and Paulas will explore in subsequent chapters, are interested in the way taste marks out distinctive sensations.¹ Although ranked among the lower senses by later thinkers, at an early stage in Greek philosophy, taste was a subject of close scrutiny.² Philosophical inquiries into taste arise in two broad contexts. First, these thinkers attempt to distinguish what human knowledge itself is and how it differs from that of others, including animals and the divine. In this context, discussions of taste reflect themes often found in the poetic discourse of divine inspiration and the knowledge of the Muses as revealed to the poet, as Hitch discussed in the previous chapter.³ Second, they examine taste through the study of human perception, including the senses; this project is largely physiological in nature, and as such, shares many affinities with contemporary developments in the medical tradition. The tongue functions among the contact senses (smell, taste and touch) as the judge of flavour, but as the source of speech it also plays a role among the distance senses (sight and hearing).⁴ While sight and hearing are heralded as the organs most suited to human intelligence, Aristotle remarks that among the senses our ability to discriminate taste is second only to touch.⁵ Plato and Aristotle inaugurate a tradition which regards the distance senses as better guides to an understanding of external things, while the contact senses are outstanding sources of information about the perceiver's own subjective state and moral character.⁶ In this chapter, I focus on the way the ancients themselves approach taste. Throughout, it becomes clear that taste stands at the centre of a burgeoning scepticism about knowledge,⁷ while also acting as a touchstone for discussions of human nature and behaviour.

The ancient philosophy of taste

Ancient philosophical theories of taste are attempts to explain how we, as humans, are able to gain an understanding of the self and our world. In making this claim I wish to establish early connections between concepts that will be crucial to the argument of this chapter. First, by marking out these theories as “attempts to explain”, I acknowledge that our earliest thinkers concentrate their attention on providing answers to concrete questions about the senses rather than providing comprehensive explanations of them. The earliest philosophical discussions of taste arise in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE among a group of thinkers we call the Presocratics.⁸ The fullest evidence for these theories, however, comes largely in the form of reports, including those of Aristotle and his successor Theophrastus (d. 287 BCE), with additional information available in a few other sources.⁹ Before Aristotle and Theophrastus introduce a framework for the study of sensation – setting out details about the organs of sense, the objects of perception and the medium through which objects are perceived – no systematic sensory models seem to have existed. The Aristotelian conceptual framework and terminology serve to order the narratives of earlier accounts, but in Hellenistic philosophy, epistemic concerns tend to overshadow physiology. Despite the systematising we find in the work of the Peripatetics, we also must recognise the extent to which ancient philosophy fails to account adequately for the mechanisms of taste or to disentangle the properties of flavours from the tangible objects themselves. The same could be said, however, about much of the work done on the sense of taste prior to the twentieth century. Taste, then, is a way to explore the more opaque general conceptions of sensation presented in our texts.

Second, I establish the focus of ancient inquiry as that which “we ... humans” are able to understand. From first to last, these thinkers make comparisons between the perceptions of gods, humans and animals a part of their discussion of the senses. But these comparisons, with one exception in the case of Aristotle’s biological works, arise from attempts to clarify the boundaries of human perception and judgement.¹⁰ This is most clearly the case in the Hellenistic period, where debates about the value of sense impressions abound. Moreover, by marking out our “ability” to gain understanding, I signal the extent to which taste in particular, and sensation in general, is seen as a capacity that can be honed or hindered in individuals, either by nature or by convention. Plato, in particular, makes use of this

notion when he likens the acquisition of knowledge and the development of character to taste experiences.

Third, I emphasise that the aim of these theories is “to gain an understanding”, marking out the distinctively epistemic context within which the discussion of taste arises and finds its zenith in ancient philosophy. Unlike modern debates about taste, which are found in predominantly aesthetic or neurophysiological contexts,¹¹ ancient discussions of taste, as well as the other sense modalities, are intimately linked with questions of knowledge, belief and the criteria of truth.¹² It is in relation to concepts of seeming (*phainomai*), believing (*dokeō*), judging (*doxazō* or *krinō*) and perceiving (*aisthanomai*) that ancient philosophy contends with those things which are internal experiences, external states of affairs and the intersection of the two.

The early Greek philosophers abandon mythological explanations of the world in favour of natural causal explanations. Thus, interest in the workings of nature arises alongside questions about how the senses reveal the world to us. In the Classical period, and particularly in the work of Plato, the development of a sensory hierarchy, as well as insights about how taste literally and figuratively makes what is external a part of what is internal, underlie metaphors about shaping moral character.¹³

Xenophanes and the origin of epistemology

Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 580–470 BCE) is the first philosopher to mention taste in Greek philosophy, and he does so in a seemingly sceptical context. An itinerant Ionian sage and poet, he set out guidelines for sympotic rituals (including the treatment of wine and perfume), elucidated the nature of the gods and specified the elements that result in a thriving city.¹⁴ He spent time among the social and intellectual elite, like other wandering rhapsodes and diviners. While he would have advised individuals and cities about a whole range of public and private matters, he would not have been intimately involved with the affairs of these cities or men.¹⁵ Like many Presocratics, his works survive only in fragments, but the ideas and theories that remain reveal a thinker deeply committed to explicating the relationship between mortals and the divine. In some ways, Xenophanes’ approach to knowledge about the world mirrors that of his poetic predecessors, who often contrast the limits of human

knowledge with that of the all-knowing Muse.¹⁶

Xenophanes was particularly interested in the relationship between human inquiry and divine revelation. He suggests that the gods have revealed many – but not all – things to humans, who, by searching, can “discover better”, even if they cannot always see what is clear and certain or speak about what has been fulfilled.¹⁷ It seems, then, that there is a set of things that the gods have enabled mortals to experience as the foundation for forming beliefs,¹⁸ and a handful of fragments highlight the role perception plays in understanding the natural world¹⁹ and society.²⁰ Xenophanes, moreover, extends the resulting epistemic conclusions from predominantly visual experiences to taste as well in fragment B38: “If god had not produced green honey, they would consider figs to be far sweeter.”²¹ The original context of this fragment is unknown, but it is assumed that the “they” refers to humanity, since the word for god (*theos*) is singular. B38 suggests that there is a special relationship between humans and the divine. Tor argues that the counter-factual structure highlights a relation between god, who facilitates mortal perceptual experience, and mere mortals, who form judgements on the basis of that experience.²² In other words, divine action is directly responsible for human perception and judgements.²³ Initially, this seems to suggest that god limits human knowledge, thereby raising questions about what we really know. However, this fragment also suggests a kind of divine disclosure: god’s production of our experience provides a criterion for our understanding.²⁴ Thus, god provides the basis for knowledge: what is revealed, we know; what is concealed, we do not know. Since we perceive what god has chosen to disclose to humanity, we need not be sceptical about the extent to which our experience reveals truths on these grounds.

Scepticism, however, arises when we consider the extent of our experience. Judgements about the flavour of something as canonically sweet as honey seem to arise from direct perception of the food itself. However, by performing Xenophanes’ thought experiment and considering how our judgement about the category of sweet things would differ without honey at the “sweetest” end of the spectrum, we realise that we would consider figs to be “far sweeter” than we do now. Our assumptions about our experience of a particular spoonful of honey or a particular fig are based on the mistaken belief that we have a full understanding of the category to which these sweet things belong. Once we have tasted agave nectar, our category of sweet things will expand to include something even sweeter than honey, and

thus lead to the judgement that figs are far less sweet than we first thought. B38 signals that even simple perceptual judgements, about which we think we have some certainty, nevertheless reveal that our experience is mediated, perhaps even constrained, by the previous experiences we have had.²⁵ Thus, when we declare the honey to be sweeter than the fig, we are making a conjectural claim on the basis of the category of things we have experienced.²⁶ We cannot exclude the possibility that there are unknown members of the category, like agave nectar, we have yet to experience, which would lead us not only to revise our judgements about figs, honey and the objects of perception more broadly, but also would make us wary of assuming that we have certain knowledge, even about things commonly experienced.²⁷ Thus, we find in Xenophanes an early form of scepticism, which questions the limits of human understanding. The concerns seen in Xenophanes' epistemology, regarding the extent to which humans can obtain knowledge, become a mainstay in Greek thought, but as we will see the focus shifts for those who come after him.

Atomism and the explanation of flavour

The Presocratic interest in explaining natural phenomena leads not only to questions about how perception reflects reality, as we saw in Xenophanes, but also to queries about the nature of humanity, both from a theoretical and from an empirical perspective.²⁸ These enquiries into human nature form the foundations for ancient physiological theories of sensation that arise in philosophical and medical contexts from the late sixth century BCE.²⁹ Presocratic philosophers inaugurate their study of human sensation by attempting to explain how the sense organs function, by examining the special objects of each sense and also by speculating about how judgements arise, or so Theophrastus suggests in his *On the Senses*, the most comprehensive report of Presocratic views on sensation that survives.³⁰ In the case of taste and touch, direct contact between the sense organ and the sense object make for fairly straightforward explanations of how the sensation arises, meaning that discussion of the contact senses quickly leads to questions about human judgement and conflicting appearances.³¹ Democritus of Abdera (c. 460–370 BCE) was among those who pursue general questions about the structure of nature and the function of the human body by examining

familiar objects and reasoning about them in general terms. Indeed, he provides our earliest distinction between flavours and the process of taste. Theophrastus tells us that alongside Plato, Democritus is one of the few philosophers to have fully engaged with the study of sensible qualities by distinguishing each of them individually, and later authors cite Democritus, Plato and Aristotle as those who offer definitions of taste.³²

Democritus' approach to the senses is guided by his atomism: everything is composed of minute, indivisible bodies and void, which come together by necessity to form all things. It is from these basic and unchanging components that all things come to be, including the soul, which he thinks is mortal and spread throughout the body. Democritus famously distinguishes between these basic elements of reality and the world we experience, saying: "by convention sweet, by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention colour, but in reality atoms and void".³³

Direct and sustained attacks of the Democritean theory in the works of Aristotle do not deter Epicurus (341–270 BCE), a contemporary of Theophrastus, from reinvigorating atomism in the period after Aristotle's death. Although he makes some changes to Democritus' theory,³⁴ the basic ontological assumptions and his account of the sensible qualities remain broadly similar to those of his predecessor. Because Epicurus shares many of Democritus' basic atomist commitments, I will focus on the Democritean mechanics of taste before comparing the implications these thinkers draw from the evidence of the senses.

Nothing about the organ of taste survives in the reports of Democritus' theory,³⁵ but he is the first philosopher we know to have listed the flavours individually (see Table 3.1): acid (*oxus*), sweet (*glukus*), astringent (*struphnos*), salty (*halmuros*), bitter (*pikros*), pungent (*drimus*) and perhaps oily (*liparos*).³⁶ He describes each flavour by explaining the shape of the atoms involved and the effects these shapes have on the perceiver. For example, describing the acid (*oxus* literally means "sharp") flavour he says:

It is in shape both angular and zigzagged and small and thin. Because of its keenness it slips swiftly everywhere, and being rough and angular it contracts and puckers, which is why it also heats the body, by producing voids within (for whatever has the most void gets most heated).

Methodologically, Democritus' description differs from those we find in contemporary medical texts. First, he avoids explaining flavours by reference to foodstuffs.³⁷ Instead, each facet of the shape's description corresponds to an effect at a different level of analysis. In the case of the acid-causing shape, sharpness allows it to penetrate, whereas its jaggedness and angularity account for the contracting and puckering that presumably occurs in the mouth, as when one bites into a sour apple or a lemon. Moreover, the effect of the shape as a whole is also related to digestion, where it creates void, thus producing heat in the perceiver.³⁸ Likewise, in the account of astringent flavours, Democritus explains how large, many-angled shapes, having the least roundness synaesthetically "blind and clog" the ducts, prevent flow and make our stomachs stand still.³⁹ Multiple explanations of this type, drawing on microscopic and anatomical changes, abound in atomist accounts of the flavours, including those of Democritus' Epicurean successors.⁴⁰ Thus, taste includes not just alterations in the mouth and on the tongue, but in the body as a whole. Moreover, taste and touch are intimately connected, since the sensations Democritus describes also include the direct sensibles of touch: dry, wet, hot and cold. Interestingly, the interactions between flavours and smells never feature in Democritus' theory of flavour, as they do in other accounts.⁴¹

Although the atomists assign particular shapes and corresponding affective abilities to each flavour, they also rely on a theory of predominance⁴² to explain the sensation (*aisthēsis*) and the potency (*dunamis*) of the taste experience. Theophrastus records Democritus' opinion thus:

Of all the shapes, there is none that is untempered and unmixed with the others. Rather, in each [sc. experience] there are many, and the same [sc. experience] has many of the smooth, rough, curved, sharp and the rest. But that of which there is the greatest quantity present has most influence upon both the sensation and the power. Also what kind of condition it enters <has an influence>, for this differs widely. And this is why sometimes the same experience produces the opposite effect and the opposite experience the same effect.⁴³

Taste, for Democritus, is a process of alteration brought about in a perceiver by certain shapes and quantities of atoms. The sensation arises from the experience the perceiver has of the interaction

between the flavour-causing atomic particles and the perceiver's own constitution. Plutarch, in his summary of Epicurus' theory of flavour, similarly describes the atomist position:

None of them [sc. flavours] has a self-contained quality or power or is more active than passive when entering the body, but acquires different properties as it blends with different bodies.⁴⁴

The focus in each passage is on the extent to which blending and mixing particles is the key to the taste experience.⁴⁵ We learn that no flavour is ever "pure", since flavour-causing shapes from an object are always mixed with the atoms of the perceiver. When smooth, spherical atoms predominate in a taste experience, the perception is of sweetness, but when the hooked shapes predominate the flavour is bitter. Thus, predominance at the atomic level has perceivable consequences at the level of sensation. Moreover, predominance explains the potency of flavours. For example, honey tastes sweet because it produces an excessively sweet taste experience, even for those who are ill.⁴⁶ Figs taste less sweet than honey, since fewer smooth, spherical atoms predominate in the taste experience. Rather than relying on an explanation like health and disease, the atomists reduce differences in perceptual experience to a simple case of arithmetic.

These two reports have serious implications for the atomist theory. First, an atom's capacity to bring about a taste experience arises in the interaction with the perceiver's particles; flavour does not exist until the taste experience occurs. Additional evidence for this interpretation comes from a gustatory context. In his *Suntrophoi*, the third-century CE comic poet Damoxenos explains that Democritus is an expert any gourmet would be well advised to study.⁴⁷ Although the cook who speaks is a self-professing Epicurean, he makes it clear that the atomist's contribution to cookery includes the importance of changes and motions in producing nourishment in food, and he recounts the opinion that it is not juice that causes food to bring on gout, rather, it is "that which comes to be" (*ta ginomena*). The context, while not concerned to produce a reliable portrait of atomist doctrine, must, nonetheless, be believable to a contemporary audience, and attests to the common ideas associated with the atomists in the public imagination. The fact that this account includes the notion that juice itself does not cause the affections is particularly revealing.

The atomic particles comprising any given flavour must, then,

acquire their affective powers on entering the body and mingling with the perceiver's atoms. This is important because although the atomists ascribe particular flavours to particular shapes, these atoms cannot themselves be perceived as sweet or sour or bitter. Instead, combination with other atoms produces that sensation. This is why, for the atomists, the predominance of a shape is a necessary condition not only for the sensation to arise, but also for the affective capacity to be formed.

Predominance also explains how people differ in their judgements about flavour: the impurity of mixtures in the mouth of each percipient allows for unique experiences, either because the predominance of shapes in the food itself differs or because the perceiver's constitution alters the predominance of shapes in the taste experience.⁴⁸ The focus, then, for the atomists, is on the process of perception rather than on any of its components. Variations between different taste experiences arise because of the multitude of shapes that may be present in any given interaction between an object and a perceiver.

So far, I have treated Democritus' and Epicurus' approach to taste together, since their basic assumptions about atoms and void and the capacity of atomic shapes to stimulate taste are similar. But scholars have long considered the conclusions drawn from these observations to differ. Democritus famously denies that sensible properties exist in objects. Honey may appear sweet, but in reality it is no more sweet than bitter.⁴⁹ This commitment to the "no more" (*ou mallon*) principle is partly motivated by conflicting accounts of the sensible qualities of objects. For example, orange juice tastes more sour after eating sweets, red and green Christmas lights look the same to a colour-blind person and the smells a dog relishes seem repulsive to me. This sort of perceptual relativity forms the basis for Democritus' claim that objects are "no more" one quality than another.⁵⁰ Thus, he seems to suggest that our senses mislead us into claiming that the honey in the jar really has properties like viscosity, yellowness and sweetness, when, in reality, it only *appears* to have these qualities. Some scholars see in this a strong commitment to scepticism, since Democritus declares truth to be hidden in the depths,⁵¹ and mankind removed from reality.⁵² An alternative is to consider Democritus' "conventional" distinction a category of its own, so that Democritus retains his commitment to the reality of atoms and void while also providing some kind of status for what arises from our experience and the transformation of our sense organs. Not only does this provide a basis

for his own theorising about the senses but it also saves his own analogic physical arguments from being undermined by such scepticism.

Epicurus, unlike Democritus, asserts that our perceptions of the changeable world, full of objects, which unlike atoms, actually have properties like sweetness, warmth and redness, are true. Epicurus abandons Democritean scepticism about the senses in order to save our experiences as the basis for our understanding of reality and to keep life from descending into chaos.⁵³ He avoids the sceptical conclusions of his predecessor by insisting on the reality of sensible qualities as those that exist in the relation between an object and a perceiver. This is clear in his discussion of wine, where Epicurus says that wine is neither heating nor cooling in itself, but that it has a mixture of powers, such that a particular quantity will heat particular perceivers with a suitable bodily constitution, while for other perceivers, with a different bodily condition, the wine will have a cooling effect.⁵⁴ Thus, for Epicurus, sensible qualities are complicated dispositional properties that cause certain sensations when atoms from an object interact with a perceiver's sense organs under particular circumstances.⁵⁵ The difference between Democritus and Epicurus is foremost an ontological one: the former argues sensible qualities are conventional properties, which lack the reality of atoms and void, while the latter believes sensible qualities are real properties of bodies, even though they arise as a result of atomic interaction.

The difference that exists for these two thinkers at the ontological level also has ramifications for their subsequent epistemological claims. Democritus holds that of the two forms of judgement – one legitimate (*gnēsiē*), the other obscure (*skotiē*) – the obscure belongs to sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch, whereas legitimate knowledge arises when the senses fail and we begin to see with the mind's eye to a finer degree.⁵⁶ This suggests that for him, legitimate knowledge cannot arise from the senses alone. For Epicurus, on the other hand, all sensations are true and the repetition of sensations results in basic mental concepts that form the basis for more complex conceptions of, and judgements about, the world. Democritus, so far as we can tell from our evidence, does not explore the ramifications of scepticism, although he is aware that the mind relies on the senses for its information.⁵⁷ The Epicureans, however, do take aim at sceptical claims. For these later atomists, questioning the reliability of the senses inhibits reason's ability to judge.⁵⁸ The Epicureans claim that all sensations – including those experienced by dreamers and madmen

– are true.⁵⁹ While at first glance this seems patently absurd, by making a sharp distinction between sensations and the judgements that arise from them, Epicurus is able to assert that any errors arise at the level of “added opinion” not at the level of sensation.⁶⁰

From this brief discussion of the views on taste among Presocratics, the overall pattern is clear: the early Greek philosophers did include very particular claims about sense perception in their study of nature and humanity. Xenophanes set the stage for the epistemological framework of the discussion of sensation, and Democritus attempts to clarify the causes and mechanisms of the senses. Even if the schematic analysis in Theophrastus is mediated via Peripatetic paraphrase, we can get a reasonably good impression of the detail the early Greek philosophers put into their effort of theorizing about perception.⁶¹ These reports are valuable because they set the stage for theorizing about taste in the Classical period.

Plato, Aristotle and the hierarchy of the senses

In the period after Democritus and before Epicurus, Plato and Aristotle dominate the philosophical scene. Although their work signals a substantial shift towards ethics, they too present conceptually rich models of sensation and taste. In addition, taste takes on a figurative role in their discussions of human behaviour and morality.

Like Xenophanes and Democritus, Plato’s epistemology incorporates a level of scepticism about the sensible world. First, he asserts that the senses are never free from error, and for this reason he denies that they offer knowledge, embracing instead the ideal Forms, which are accessible only to the mind.⁶² Sense objects, as part of the physical world, are mere shadows of the perfect realm of the Forms. As such, they cannot form a basis for knowledge.⁶³ Second, the body and its senses are a hindrance to the immortal soul in each of us. This leads to a tension between the rational soul, which controls the body from the head, and the senses, which, like the emotions, have their seat in the torso.⁶⁴ Sight and hearing, concerned as they are with perception at a distance, can be harnessed in the soul’s search for knowledge,⁶⁵ but taste, smell and touch, which arise from and initiate change, are intimately focused on the body and its desires for food, drink and sex, which the philosopher ought to eschew.⁶⁶ Thus, Plato’s commitment to scepticism about the sensible world has broader implications,

including the separation of epistemology from physiology and the creation of a sensory hierarchy that pervades not only his physiology but his ethics as well.⁶⁷ Plato's discussion of taste – both literal and figurative – illustrates the far-ranging effects of his epistemology on other areas of inquiry.

Plato's account of the physiology of taste occurs in two sections of the *Timaeus*, a text that addresses physical questions including how basic constituents of matter create the cosmos, how and why heavenly bodies rotate and how human beings were created.⁶⁸ The first account of taste is found in a “moderate and sensible diversion” into a “likely account” (59d) of the “multifarious shapes, combinations and transformations” (61c) of the basic plane shapes into composite properties that have an effect on the body. Plato acknowledges that such an account requires an appeal to sense perception, and his description of the “juices” as a variety of water combined with fire appeals to more than one sensory domain. He says that although many of these types are nameless, wine, oil, honey and tart juice are particularly conspicuous (59e5–60b5). Wine, he says, “warms” the soul as well as the body: a surprising claim given Plato's division between the rational soul and the sensate body. Oil, described only in relation to its effect on vision, smooths and divides the visual ray that reaches out from the eye to the object. The description of tart juice, by contrast, highlights its hazardous, caustic effect on the flesh as well as the foamy texture which it causes. Only the explanation of honey draws attention to the effect the substance has on the organ of taste, and like Democritus' account of sweetness, here too, it has a relaxing effect, returning the mouth to its natural state. These four juices form the basis for Plato's later, more explicit account of the properties of taste and the tongue.

In the second discussion of taste (*Timaeus* 65c–66d), identified as a disturbance that affects the body, taste and touch converge in an explanation of rough and smooth textures (see Table 3.1).⁶⁹ Like Democritus, Plato attempts to establish the cause of each of his seven flavours, adding harsh or tangy (*austēros*) to his predecessor's list. Where Democritus' account seems to oscillate between changes in the mouth and those in the stomach, Plato focuses on the mouth-feel brought about by the elemental qualities of each flavour. The “earth-like parts” of flavours like sour and tangy contract the vessels of the tongue and dry them, whereas the bitter and the salty, like water, rinse the tongue. Pungent flavours, absorbing the heat of the mouth, are ignited and return the fire to the head, whereas the account of the

acidic flavour reads like proto-chemistry:

Those things that have been refined by the process of decomposition and then intrude themselves into the narrow vessels, are proportioned both to the earth parts and those of air that are contained within the vessels, so that they agitate the earth and air parts and cause them to be stirred one around the other. As these are being stirred, they surround one another, and as parts of one sort intrude themselves into parts of another, they make hollows that envelop the parts that go inside. So when a hollow envelope of moisture, whether earthy or pure, as the case may be, is stretched around the air, we get moist vessels of air, hollow spheres of water. Some of these, those that form a transparent enclosure consisting of pure moisture are called “bubbles”; but those whose moisture is earthy and agitates and rises upwards all at once are called by the terms “effervescence” and “fermentation”. That which causes these disturbances is called “acid” to the taste.⁷⁰

In each of these descriptions, Plato identifies how certain combinations of elementary particles act on the body. In so doing, he highlights the extent to which the tongue, and by extension the whole body, is at the mercy of that which enters it.

Only the description of sweetness breaks from this model, since it bears no connection to the basic elements. Instead, sweetness is intricately tied with the natural state of the sense organ itself. The function of sweetness is to return the tongue to its natural state. Thus, in the cases where the tongue is too dilated, sweetness constricts it, and when it is too contracted sweetness relaxes it. In this sense, sweetness acts as a restorative, returning the body to its natural state after the “violent disturbance” it suffers from other flavours (66c). Plato’s focus on the disturbing and curative effects of flavours links literal taste to the general concerns of pleasure and pain. Nonetheless, this account of sweetness, too, highlights the extent to which the body in general and the tongue in particular suffers from sensory affections. Among Plato’s description of the senses, only sight, with its visual ray, retains a modicum of control over its sense objects, although even a bright flash or a quenching darkness can overpower the eyes (68a). Thus, we see that Plato’s *Timaeus* reinforces his commitment both to the division between physiology and epistemology and to the hierarchy of the senses.

Like Plato, Aristotle elevates sight and hearing above the other

senses because they lead us towards knowledge, but unlike his teacher, he recognises the utility of sensation.⁷¹ Aristotle provides a comprehensive account of the organ, objects and process of taste, exploring the extent to which it is integrated with the other sense modalities. Although each sense modality is distinct,⁷² Aristotle emphasises particular links between taste, touch and smell. Surprisingly, he concludes that touch is also responsible for our intelligence; other animals may hear, see or smell better than we do, but humans are best at touch and taste. In some places he treats taste as an extension of touch.⁷³ Since it provides us with the capacity to choose what is nutritious and avoid what is poisonous, taste, like touch, is essential for survival. Moreover, the immediacy of our contact with food is a potential source of pleasure and pain, and in this respect taste, although more discriminating, is analogous to smell.⁷⁴

For Aristotle, as for Plato, flavours arise from the interaction between water, earth and the plants that filter them, and definite ratios among the flavours result in the most pleasant flavours.⁷⁵ Sweetness and richness are closely related because they are responsible for the nourishment we draw from food,⁷⁶ whereas other flavours, lying on the spectrum between sweetness and bitterness, add seasoning and counteract the nutritious nature of sweet.⁷⁷ Because taste is a quality of nutrient matter, pleasure arises primarily in relation to appetite: when hunger is sated or an undesirable dish served, the pleasures of taste wane.⁷⁸ Taste, for Aristotle, is functional; the connection between flavour and nourishment is his primary concern. Thus we find in Aristotle the culmination of Plato's division between physiology and epistemology.

The extension of taste

In his ethical works, Plato's discussion of pain, pleasure and desire are enlivened by metaphors of taste. Such metaphors highlight the way literal taste experience shapes the character of individuals and cities. The uneducated son of the thrifty oligarch is transformed into the democratic man when he "tastes the honey of drones" (*Republic* 559d).⁷⁹ Like an addictive gateway drug, this taste leads to "every variety of multi-coloured (*poikilia*) pleasure" which ultimately corrupts body and soul, leaving the youth to return to and live openly among the lotus-eaters (560c). When the youth experiences pleasures without

working to obtain them, he is enticed to experience other, similar pleasures which ultimately spoil whatever good remains.⁸⁰ Accordingly, Socrates insists that the guardians of his theoretical city should restrict citizens' exposure to pleasures, especially those of the alimentary sort.⁸¹ Like Homeric heroes, guardians should abstain from fish, boiled meat, sweets, Syracusan and Sicilian-style dishes and Attic pastries.⁸² "Such embellishments", Socrates concludes, "give rise to licentiousness ... and illness" in individuals and by extension in the city. Socrates makes figs the only sweet in his ideal city, because he contends that restraining alimentary pleasures produces morally improved citizens. Adeimantus rejects Socrates' utopia as "a city for pigs", preferring the "luxurious" and "fevered" city where men "recline on couches ... and dine from tables and have relishes and desserts".⁸³ The cook appears in a long list of artisans, among them beauticians, butchers and furniture makers, who emerge in Adeimantus' city, "gorged with a swollen mass of things which are not in cities out of necessity".⁸⁴ Individual desires, which begin innocuously enough with a taste for the pleasures of sweets, when shared among an entire citizenry, corrupt the *polis* itself.⁸⁵ Thus, dietary preferences are seen, by Plato at least, as shaping moral character.

Taste also appears in educational contexts, where the metaphors differentiate the philosophical connoisseur from other men. In addition to his philosophical diet, the philosopher has "necessarily tasted the other pleasures since childhood", unlike the profit-lover, who has never tasted the sweetness of learning the nature of things. In fact, Socrates says, "even if he were eager to taste it [sc. learning], he could not do so easily".⁸⁶ The simile suggests that the profit-lover's character inhibits the satiation of his desires, even for those things that would benefit him, whereas the philosopher's early exposure to "other pleasures" alongside philosophical study inoculated him against their persuasive powers.⁸⁷ Thus, we see that character and training can also, for Plato, shape one's taste. Likewise, in distinguishing between the true philosophers and the lovers of sights and sounds, Plato classes the young, choosy learner as a "bad eater", unlike the philosopher, whose desire for learning is insatiable.⁸⁸ Rather it is the few, noble and good, who may taste "the sweetness and blessedness" of philosophy (*Republic* 496c). The philosophical gourmand directs his desires towards the right things because it is in his nature to do so. But even philosophy, if badly applied, can have detrimental effects on learners; Socrates cautions young men and late learners to carefully

cultivate a taste for dialectic and philosophical reasoning, since they are in danger of making games of philosophy and taking quibbles seriously.⁸⁹ Perhaps, like Theaetetus, they need to be fed titbits in order to avoid being overwhelmed by the “tempting meals” of philosophical questions.⁹⁰ Thus, even the pleasures of philosophy and the knowledge it brings must be cautiously indulged.

Plato’s taste metaphors, tied as they are to character and desire, differ markedly from those of the other senses, particularly vision, which tends to illustrate the attainment of knowledge.⁹¹ In this respect, Plato’s sensory hierarchy and his epistemology are reflected in his use of metaphor. The ways tastes disturb and soothe the tongue also are reflected in metaphors, which show how character is shaped and formed by experience. In philosophy as in dining, what is external becomes internal, and the individual is transformed, either in body or in soul, by the process.

Conclusion

Although the physiological aspect of taste plays a major role in the theories of ancient philosophy, it is the implications – epistemological and ethical – that have the greatest influence on subsequent philosophical reasoning. Xenophanes plays a founding role, since he introduces a kind of proto-scepticism about the extent to which the senses present us with accurate knowledge about the world. These concerns are at the forefront of Democritus’ concerns about the variability of sensory experience and the reliability of the senses for knowledge. Plato rejects sensory experience as the basis for knowledge, and while Aristotle attempts to find a way to bridge the gap between the sensible and the rational, it is Epicurus, with his outright denial of sensory scepticism, who sets the stage for the bitter debates between the sceptics and the dogmatists in the later Hellenistic and early Roman periods. The sensory debates of antiquity reverberate in the Western intellectual tradition, the echoes of which are clearly heard in the burgeoning field of sensory studies.

¹See Beare ([1906] 1992) on ancient theories of cognition. On the philosophy of taste, see Korsmeyer (1999) and B. Smith (2007). See volume introduction for a discussion of the tongue.

²Pace Korsmeyer (1999: 11), the Presocratics have no defined hierarchy; reports about the predominance of sight and hearing may result from excerpting techniques. See, e.g., Empedocles DK 31 A86, Diogenes DK 64 A19 and

Anaxagoras DK 59 B21.

- 3For honey's associations with prophecy and truth see Nünlist (1998: 60–3 and 300–6); Waszink (1974); cf. Pucci (1977: 19–21, 27–9). On bees and poetry see Scheinberg (1979) and Larson (1995). See Liebert (2010) on apian metaphors in Plato. See also Hitch ([Chapter 1](#)) and Totelin ([Chapter 3](#)).
- 4Plato, *Timaeus* 47e. On the tongue see the volume introduction. See Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants (De causis plantarum)* 6.9.4 on sweetness as the source of good flavour and bitterness as the source of good scent.
- 5Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 980a20–31 highlights the predominance of sight and hearing. In *On the Soul (De anima)* 421a17–26 and *On the Senses (De sensu)* 494b16–18 Aristotle says we excel all creatures in discriminating touch and taste.
- 6Kant ([1798] 1996: 40–8, 141–3) takes up just such a distinction; See also Gowers ([Chapter 5](#)).
- 7Xenophanes and Democritus are often considered proto-sceptics, setting out distinctions between appearances and reality, knowledge and belief and the evident and the non-evident. See Sedley (1983b).
- 8“Presocratic” is a modern classification established by Hermann Diels’ *Die Fragmente Vorsokratiker* (abbreviated DK). This collection is the standard scholarly source for the Presocratics, a term meant to demarcate those thinkers with interests in cosmology and physical questions, rather than the moral questions associated with Socrates; it is not primarily a chronological distinction, since the last of these thinkers were Socrates’ (and in some instances even Plato’s) contemporaries. See Kirk *et al.* (1993); Mansfeld (1986); Nightingale (1995); Long (1999: 1–21); Warren (2007: 1–21).
- 9Other material comes from later Aristotelian commentators or from collections of the opinions of earlier thinkers. See Baltussen (2000); Mansfeld (1986, 1999); Mansfeld & Runia (1997, 2009, 2010).
- 10Even in his biological works Aristotle often draws on human parallels.
- 11See Korsmeyer (1999) and Smith (2007, 2014).
- 12See Liebert (2010) for an “aesthetic” reading of taste in Plato, which focuses on the gustatory analogies in the *Republic*.
- 13On sensory hierarchy see Baltussen (2015: 34); Korsmeyer (1999: 11–37); Classen (1993).
- 14Xenophanes as sage: DK 21 B8; poet: B1, 2, 4; wanderer: B45; on wine: B5; perfume: B3; nature of the gods: B15–17; politics: B2, 20–2. See Leshner (1992); Warren (2007: 119–34); Barnes (1982: 82–99).
- 15For the private and civic influence of itinerant diviners see Homer, *Odyssey* 17.382–5, *Iliad* 2.484–6; Theognis 141–2; Pindar *Nemean Odes* 6.1–6; Herodotus, *Histories* VI.50; Plato, *Laws* 909b5; *Republic* 364e5. See Montiglio (2000: 86–105); Sassi (2001: 16–19); Flower (2008: 29–37).
- 16On Xenophanes and early Greek poetry see Classen (1989: 91–103). See Montiglio (2005: 100, 123–46 and 2000: 88–90) on wandering Ionian thinkers. On the contrast between human and divine capacities see Heraclitus DK 22 B79, Philolaus DK 44 B6.
- 17DK 21 B18, B36 and B34. See Tor (2013: 156–8, 257–8); Leshner (1992: 39, 177); Barnes (1982: 140).
- 18On Xenophanean perception and judgement see Eisenstadt (1974: 149); Leshner (1992: 178). Fränkel (1974: 123) makes knowledge that which is gained specifically through perceptual experience. Cf. Barnes (1982: 138); Drozdek (2004: 152).
- 19Xenophanes uses ὁρᾶται in DK 21 B28 about the earth’s upper limits and ἰδέσθαι (B32) when discussing rainbows. See also DK 21 B34, B36.

- 20 *ποσοῦν* (DK 21 B2) characterises the perceived glory of a star athlete. In B1 tactile sensations of clean hands and wreathed heads and the fragrance of frankincense, myrrh and wine lead to the anticipation of tastes and sounds, while B4 stirs the senses by evoking conversation over a postprandial snack of wine and chickpeas, while reclining on a “soft couch” before a winter fire.
- 21 DK 21 B38: εἰ μὴ χλωρὸν ἔφυσε θεὸς μέλι, πολλὸν ἔφασκον γλύσσειν σῦκα πέλεσθαι.
- 22 See Tor (2013: 265–7) and Leshner (1992: 180).
- 23 Pace Tor (2013: 255 n.25, 269), Xenophanes’ aorist (ἔφυσε) likely demarcates a single event not an “ongoing [sic] affair”. The event may be the establishment of a mechanism – perhaps the honeybee or apiculture –by which honey is generated. See Barnes (1982: 150), who argues that a great Xenophanean achievement is requiring beliefs to have “respectable causal ancestry” to count as knowledge.
- 24 Cf. Tor (2013: 276). This position has affinities with poetic notions of divine disclosure; see Gotshalk (2000).
- 25 This interpretation, also found in Tor (2013: 265–6), undermines the view, first held by Fränkel (1974: 123–5), that mortals have certain knowledge of things that they experience directly. See also Eisenstadt (1974: 149 n.33) and Drozdek (2004: 152).
- 26 See Tor (2013: 265–6) and Mogyoródi (2006: 139).
- 27 Following McCoy (1989: 237); Mogyoródi (2006: 138). See also Tor (2013: 266).
- 28 See, for example, Hippocrates, *On the Nature of Man*; and *On Ancient Medicine* as well as *On the Art* for theoretical approaches to the body in the Hippocratic corpus. Lloyd (1991) is sceptical about empirical study of the human body in this period.
- 29 See Totelin (Chapter 3).
- 30 We do not know whether the Presocratics pursued their study of the senses this systematically. It is likely that the ordering of the exposition is Theophrastus’ own. See Rudolph (forthcoming) on Theophrastus’ authorial method.
- 31 The most complex sensory process is vision. See Rudolph (2015) and Nightingale (2015). On smell see Baltussen (2015) and on touch see Sedley (forthcoming).
- 32 Theophrastus, *On the Senses* (*De sensibus*) 60. See Table 3.1 for these philosophers’ lists of the flavours and their ordering.
- 33 DK 68 B9. See Rudolph (2009); Lee (2005); Ganson (1999); O’Keefe (1997); Sedley (1988, 1992).
- 34 On sensation in Epicureanism see Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* 2.382–442; 3.350–69; 4.217–468, 480–99, 522–721, 858–76; Long and Sedley (1997: 72–8 = 15A–F). See O’Keefe (2010) and Warren (2002).
- 35 Theophrastus, *On the Senses* reports Democritus’ theory of vision and hearing, but concerning the other senses the atomist account is “nearly the same as the majority of writers” (57). Cf. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* 4.615–32.
- 36 Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 6.1.6 includes “oily” among Democritus’ flavours, but it is excluded from his account in *On the Senses*.
- 37 Hippocratics give examples of flavours, e.g. apples ([Hp.] *On Diet* 2.55), vinegar (*On Acute Disease* 16.40–6) and bread yeast (*De victu* 2.42.4–6) for ὀξύς, Plato (*Timaeus* 66a2–b7) says ὀξύς causes effervescence and fermentation; the Hippocratic *Affections* associates it with thinning (55) and laxative effects (59).
- 38 The flavour δρμύς, like ὀξύς, is also warming. For Democritus heat is a product of the movement of atoms in the perceiver. See Rudolph (2009).
- 39 Theophrastus, *On the Senses* 66.1–4.
- 40 Multiple accounts are common in Democritus; Cf. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* 2.381–40 and 4.615–72, where shapes are also responsible for flavour.

- 41See Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants* 6.9.4; Korsmeyer (1999); M. M. Smith (2007). On touch see Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* 2.434–5 and Sedley (forthcoming).
- 42Democritus shares this theoretical approach with Anaxagoras and Empedocles. On Anaxagoras (DK 59 B1, B11, B13, B15, B21) see Warren (2007: 119–34); Barnes (1982: 538–40). Empedocles’ theory of generation utilises a predominance of the powers of Love and Strife seeking proportionate relations between elemental “roots” (DK 31 A38, A46, B17, B26, B35). See Barnes (1982: 419–23).
- 43Theophrastus, *On the Senses* 67–8.
- 44Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 1110b12–c2. See also Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* 2.399–407, 4.615–72.
- 45See also Boulay ([Chapter 11](#)) on mixing flavours.
- 46Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* 1.936–42 = 4.11–17.
- 47Damoxenos, Fr 2.12–15 Kock. See DK 28 A47.
- 48Theophrastus, *On the Senses* 63.7–64.3 makes clear that for Democritus, perceivers’ judgements change according to their experiences and age.
- 49Epicurus, by contrast, holds that all perceptions are true. See introductory discussion in O’Keefe (2010: 33–40, 87–96).
- 50Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.213.
- 51Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 9.72.
- 52Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 7.137. Sedley (1983a, 1983b, 1992); O’Keefe (1997, 2010); Ganson (1999); Castagnoli (2013).
- 53Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 1108f. See O’Keefe (2010: 87–96); Castagnoli (2013).
- 54Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 1109e–1110d.
- 55For further analysis see O’Keefe (2010: 87–96).
- 56Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 7.139. See Sedley (1992). Democritus is aware that the mind relies on the senses for its information: DK 68 B11 and B125.
- 57Democritus DK 68 B125. See Sedley (1992) and Lee (2005).
- 58Epicurus, *Principal Doctrines* 23, Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* 4.480–5.
- 59Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 10.32.
- 60Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* 50. See O’Keefe (2010) for an introductory discussion.
- 61See Rudolph (forthcoming).
- 62Plato, *Theaetetus* 186d, *Phaedrus* 73–6, *Republic* 476, 523–4, *Phaedo* 65c. Aesthetic considerations in the hierarchy of the senses are largely absent. However, in the *Hippias Major* 297e, Plato says the pleasures of sight and hearing, unlike those of the other senses, are beautiful.
- 63See Plato, *Theaetetus* 151e ff.
- 64Plato, *Republic* 9.588c–e. Cf. *Timaeus* 44d, 69c–71a, 72e–73a. See Broadie (2011) and Johansen (2004).
- 65Plato, *Republic* 508b. Cf. *Timaeus* 45c, 47a–c, 75e.
- 66Plato, *Phaedo* 64d. See also Plato, *Philebus* for a discussion of pleasure and its effect on the search for wisdom. See below for Plato’s metaphorical use of taste.
- 67On the hierarchy of the senses in relation to taste see Korsmeyer (1999: 11–37).
- 68For more on flavour categories in the *Timaeus*, see Totelin ([Chapter 3](#), including [Table 3.1](#)) and Paulas ([Chapter 12](#)).
- 69Broadie (2011: 2) calls this a “bizarrely technical discussion”.
- 70Plato, *Timaeus* 66a–b.
- 71On the sensory hierarchy see Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 980a20–5, *On the Senses* 436b18–437a16, *On the Soul* 416b31–424b21, *History of Animals* 661b2. See Johansen (1997); Modrak (1987); Caston (2009) on Aristotelian sensation and

psychology.

- 72Aristotle, *On the Soul* 421b4–8, 426b9–16. This is a simplified explanation; Aristotle famously recognises the extent to which common sensibles are perceived (424b22–425b10, 418a17–19), especially by sight (437a6–9) and touch (*On the Senses* 442b4–9). See also *On the Senses* 449a5–20; Freeland (1992); Sorabji (1979); Hamlyn (1966: 17–30); Korsmeyer (1999: 18–26). Cf. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* 4.486–99.
- 73On taste and touch see Aristotle, *On the Senses* 436b13–17, 445a5–7, 422a8–b16. See Korsmeyer (1999: 20).
- 74On taste and smell see Aristotle, *On the Soul* 421a17–25, *On the Senses* 440b28–441a3, 442b26–443a21, 443b9–16. On smell see Baltussen (2015).
- 75Aristotle, *On the Senses* 442a9–12, 18–19, *On the Soul* 426b4–8. See Boulay (Chapter 11) on proportionate mixing and Totelin (Chapter 3, including Table 3.1) on botany.
- 76Aristotle, *On the Senses* 441b24, 442a1–8, 19.
- 77Aristotle, *On the Senses* 442a9–28.
- 78Aristotle, *On the Senses* 443b20–5.
- 79Cf. *Republic* 404b–408e and *Laws* 752c3, where children get a “taste” for the laws. See Liebert (2010: esp. 99) on Plato’s reconfiguration of honey as “a toxin inimical to the healthy state and incommensurate with the philosophic values of purity and moderation”. See Totelin (Chapter 3) on honey, and Hitch (Chapter 1) and Warren (Chapter 6) on transformation.
- 80Plato, *Republic* 504e–505e. See Wolfsdorf (2012); Gosling and Taylor (1982). See further discussion of the link between taste and pleasure in introduction to this volume.
- 81Cf. Plato, *Laws* 762e, where the wardens “should be no stranger to a meager daily ration of uncooked food”.
- 82Plato, *Republic* 404b–d. “Corinthian girls” are among the list of region-specific cuisine, marking the strong link between alimentary and sexual pleasure. These dietary indulgences and the associated lifestyle are compared directly to lyric modes of poetry and music.
- 83Plato, *Republic* 372d–e. Pigs are associated with sloth, not gluttony, in ancient Greece (See Semonides fr. 7.2–6; Plato, *Laws* 807a–b). At *Republic* 559b, Plato states desire for relishes and delicacies are necessary when they are “beneficial to well-being”, but desire for inappropriate food should be eradicated through restraint and education, since indulgence is “harmful both to the body and to the reason and moderation of the soul”. For synaesthetic accounts of pleasure and desire in the democratic man see *Republic* 558d–561e.
- 84Plato, *Republic* 373b.
- 85See also Plato, *Republic* 358e6, where “tasting” injustice leads weak people to establish a form of social contract.
- 86Plato, *Republic* 582b.
- 87See *Laws* 634a–642a, where the Athenian asks whether it would be better to inoculate citizens against the potentially corrosive effects of pleasures through contact with them. The ensuing discussion centres on the extent to which the character of individuals could withstand contact with pleasure, particularly that of drink. On citizenship and the *Laws* see Prauscello (2014).
- 88Plato, *Republic* 476c.
- 89See Plato, *Sophist* 251b–c, *Republic* 539b, *Philebus* 15d. This metaphor continues in the Stoic tradition. See Epictetus, *Diatribes* 3.21.1, cf. *Enchiridion* 46.
- 90Plato, *Theaetetus* 157c–d. Plato exploits the connection between taste and sex, for it is by partaking in Socrates’ morsels that Theaetetus is able to give birth to new ideas. Cf. Plato, *Republic* 411d.

91 Plato's most famous sight metaphors are found at *Republic* 507c–518d.

Tastes in ancient botany, medicine and science

Bitter herbs and sweet honey

Laurence B. Totelin

Indeed when healers to children the foul wormwood
Attempt to give, first the brim around the cup
They moisten with the sweet and golden fluidity of honey,
So that the unwary age of children be tricked
Along the lips, and meanwhile she drinks the bitter
Juice of wormwood and, though tricked, not betrayed
But rather invigorated by such a deed, regains strength.¹

The title of this chapter refers to the famous verses of Lucretius, a first-century BCE Epicurean poet, who, in *On the Nature of Things*, compares the philosopher writing in verse to the physician sweetening a bitter medical draught of wormwood with sweet honey.² This was a pertinent analogy, since the combination of wormwood and honey is found very regularly in ancient medical texts.³ Wormwood was the bitter herb *par excellence*, and honey the sweet vegetable-derived product *par excellence*. Nor was Lucretius unique in using the combination of honey and wormwood in a metaphorical sense. Thus the comedian Menander (fourth century BCE):

If you reproach he who takes the food you give him,
You're sprinkling wormwood on Attic honey.⁴

In ancient texts dealing with plants and other *materia medica*, taste is the sense that is mentioned most because it was the best at determining pharmacological and nutritive qualities.⁵ Pharmacological and botanical writers created complex systems of taste classification; in practice, however, they insisted most on sweet and bitter tastes.⁶ In this chapter, I will review discussions of taste in

Greek and Roman texts about plants and simple medicines (that is, single ingredients used medicinally). I will first present the types of flavours ancient botanical and medical authors identified. Next, I will explore the link between taste and medical or nutritive properties these writers postulated. Finally, I will examine how the ancients attempted to improve the taste of ancient plants through cultivation. This will lead me to conclusions on the metaphorical role taste had to play in “scientific” writings in the Graeco-Roman world. One of my main sources is the botanical writings of Theophrastus (fourth century BCE, the student of Aristotle and his successor at the head of the Lyceum): *Enquiry into Plants* and *Causes of Plants*. The philosopher devoted much of book six of his *Causes of Plants* to the question of taste.⁷ He did so because he argued that the final cause of plants (their *telos*) was to be used by man, and in particular to serve as food and as medicine.

The types of taste

Botanical and pharmacological writers in the ancient world regularly described the taste of plants and other medical substances. Often, they did so by comparing the taste of a plant with that of another, presumably better known. To take one example among many, the physician Galen (129–216 CE) described the taste of caucalis (a fennel-like plant, *Caucalis grandiflora* L.) as follows: “Concerning caucalis. Some call it wild daucus, for it is similar to that plant in taste (*kata tēn geusin*) and in power (*kata tēn dunamin*).”⁸ Ancient authors sometimes took care to describe the taste of various parts of a plant, as in the pharmacologist Dioscorides’ (first century CE) description of fumitory (*Corydalis claviculata* Pers.): “at the top of the stem, there are delicate heads, full of seeds, similar in taste to black cumin, while the taste of the leaf is similar to anise”.⁹ This method of description through comparison is sometimes criticised for its inaccuracy, but it is in fact quite sophisticated, as the number of plants used as comparing points is relatively limited. Using specialised taste vocabulary can, at times, render the description rather obscure, as in this description by Galen:

Concerning the root of agaric: the root of agaric grows upon the trunk [of trees]. Its taste is, at first, somewhat sweet (*glukeia tis*), but after a little while, it appears somewhat bitter (*hupopikros*) and, with time, it brings on a hint of acridness (*drimutētos emfasin*),

and a note of astringency (*bracheias stupseōs*).¹⁰

Galen’s description of agaric (*Polyporus* sp.) is rather exceptional, as it names four of the eight most regularly named types of taste: sweet, bitter, acrid, and astringent; usual descriptions refer most commonly to sweet and bitter.

As Paulas discusses in [Chapter 12](#), ancient philosophers and natural scientists debated over the number, list and definition of tastes, and each of them had a different order and arrangement of the flavours (see [Table 3.1](#)). Plato, in his *Timaeus*, identified eight types of taste, attributing the quality of taste to the smoothness or roughness of the taste particles.¹¹ Aristotle had a slightly different list of eight tastes, organized in pairs, headed by sweet and bitter. He explained that tastes, like colours, mixed to form complex flavours. While colours were seven in number, tastes were eight, but salty and bitter were virtually one and the same thing.¹² He also provided a definition of the taste-able:

The taste-able is a kind of tangible And the body in which flavour is found, that is, the taste-able, is in a liquid matter, as it were But nothing can produce a sensation of taste without wetness. It must have wetness actually or potentially, like salt. For salt can be dissolved and is liquefactive of the tongue.¹³

Table 3.1The main flavour lists and their ordering from Democritus to Galen (in *Against Lycus*)

Taste	Democritus	Plato	Aristotle	Theophrastus	Pliny the Elder	Galen
Acid (ὀξύ [oxys], acutus)	1	7	8	8	9	2
Astringent (στυφός [strophos], acutus)	–	–	–	–	7	9
Bitter (πικρός [bikros], amarus)	4	3	2	7	4	4
Harsh (αἰσχυρὸς [aischyrōs], asperus)	–	2	6	3	3	8
Honey (μέλι [melos], mel)	–	S3*	–	–	–	–
Luscious (σιάνος)	–	–	–	–	2	–
Milky (γαλακτικός [galaktikos], lactus)	–	–	–	10	12	–
Nitrous (πράσινος [prasinōs], nitrosus)	–	6	–	–	–	–
Oily (λίπος [lipos], pinguis)	7*	S2*	3	2	2	10
Pungent (βίβρος [bibros], acer)	6	5	5	5	6	3
Salty (ἅλινος [halinos], salinus)	5	–	4	6	10	6
Salty (ἅλινος [halinos])	–	4	–	–	–	5
Sour (στυφός [strophos], acrisus)	3	1	7	4	7	7
Sweet (γλυκύς [glykys], dulcis)	2	8	1	1	1	1
Varjuice (ὀρώς [oros], fucus lactens)	–	S4*	–	–	–	–
Wine-like (οἰνικός [oinikos], vinos)	–	S1*	–	9	11	–

Notes

Numbers in columns 2–7 refer to the place order in the author’s list of flavours.
S1*–S4*refer to the flavoured saps that Plato identifies in *Timaeus* 60a–b and refers back to at *Timaeus* 65c.
aTheophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 6.1.6 lists “oily” as a Democritean flavour; his account in *On the Senses* 65–6 does not.

Two of the four elements and two of the four qualities, then, played

an important role in taste: water and wet, and earth and dry. Theophrastus followed Aristotle in his discussion of taste, also putting emphasis on the elements of earth and water in his definition, which opens book six of *Causes of Plants*: “flavour is the intermixture of the dry and earthy in the wet, or the straining through the dry of the wet under the action of heat”.¹⁴ Theophrastus listed the same eight tastes as Aristotle, but did not organise them in pairs of opposites; he also mentioned the wine-like and the milkyflavours, which were difficult to subsume under other headings.¹⁵ For Theophrastus, it is the degree of wetness or dryness in a substance that determines its taste: the sweet belongs to the dry, whereas the bitter belongs to the wet.¹⁶ Changes of taste were caused by concoction: heat brought sweetness to bitterness – we shall come back to concoction later.

The Roman encyclopaedist Pliny the Elder, in one of his books devoted to plants, listed ten types of taste, to which he also added the wine-like flavour (one in which several tastes are discerned simultaneously) and the milky flavour.¹⁷ Galen devoted a long section of the fourth book of his *On the Mixing and Powers of Simple Remedies* to taste.¹⁸ His discussion is very much influenced by Theophrastus, who is mentioned by name on several occasions. Galen’s focus, however, is more medicinal than Theophrastus’; the physician insists on the importance of experience (*peira*) in determining medicinal qualities through the sense of taste.¹⁹ Galen discusses ten main tastes; these are conveniently listed in another treatise: *Against Lycus*.²⁰

The ancients also discussed whether water had a taste or not, and Galen sometimes described foods as being “without quality” or “bland”, giving the following definition of the term in his description of the colocynth:

Concerning the colocynth: raw it is distasteful, extremely bad for the stomach, and indigestible [literally un-concocted, *apeptos*] The colocynth, which I am now discussing, when it is well cooked, has no clear quality of taste, unless one wants to argue that something which is neither pungent, nor salty, astringent, bitter, nor anything else of the sort, is a taste, in the same way as water. But everyone is accustomed to refer to such things as “bland” (*apoia*), I shall call them in this way for the sake of clarity.²¹

As Baker shows in [Chapter 8](#), the ancients knew that cooking foods could alter their taste and health properties. In this case, boiling the colocynth transforms it from a “distasteful” and “extremely

indigestible” food, to one that is merely bland and literally “doing nothing” (*a-poiros*).²²

In short, determining the number of flavours was no easy task. The fourth-century physician Oribasius sums this up very well:

Concerning the differences (*diaphoras*) and powers (*dunameōs*) of flavours: the flavours that are to be found in each plant, animal, and indeed in the earth, are very numerous and it is not easy to count their types.²³

Although it was difficult to determine types of flavours, experiencing taste was important because it helped in determining the powers (*dunameis*) of natural substances, to which we now turn.

Taste and the identification of medicinal and nutritive qualities

Taste was one of the best ways to identify a plant and its powers. We saw earlier that caucalis had both the same taste and qualities as daucus. There are numerous other examples where ancient authors link a substance’s taste to its powers. For instance, Galen writes of the man orchis (*saturion*, *Fritillaria graeca* L.): “man orchis is dry and wet in blending (*krasin*), on which account (*dio*) it appears sweet to those who taste it”.²⁴ There is a causal link between the qualities of man orchis and its taste, indicated by the Greek conjunction *dio*. In a chapter of his *On the Properties of Foodstuffs*, Galen gives a more general formulation to this principle:

Therefore it is safer to examine each of the parts of plants in and of itself, first by taste and smell, and then by trying it as a food. For smell and taste teach us what sort of flavour and odour the part of the plant possesses and immediately points to its general blending (*holēn krasin*).²⁵

Several senses, then, had a role to play in determining the qualities of natural substances, but taste and smell were the most important. They had to be used in conjunction for three reasons. First, according to Theophrastus, the organs responsible for tasting (tongue) and smelling (nose) were close together, as were the sensibles (the taste-able and the smell-able) – smell and taste have a certain kinship (*sungeneia*).²⁶

Some smells, difficult to perceive at first, become more apparent when a substance is tasted because “when broken down and heated up by the chewing process, they produce a certain vapour, which on account of its fineness is sent through the passages to the organ of smell”.²⁷ Second, man’s sense of smell was rather weak. As a result of this weakness, the vocabulary of smell was very limited, most smells being subsumed under the headings “pleasant” or “unpleasant”, or named after tastes.²⁸ Third, while there was usually a correspondence between a substance’s smell and its taste (for instance, onion and garlic are “biting” both to the tongue and to the nose), this was not always the case.²⁹ As Aristotle stated, “some things possess equivalent smell and taste (for instance, they have a sweet smell and a sweet taste), but others possess contrasted [smell and taste]”.³⁰

Medical and pharmacological authors created complex lists of properties associated with flavours; the summary Oribasius gave of Galen’s extremely long discussion is worth quoting here:

Doubtless the effects [of taste] are in accordance with their blending. For the astringent (*to stuphon*) brings together, compresses, contracts, repels, and thickens; and even before all these, it cools, dries, and sometimes brings forth what is called *haimōdia* (the sensation of having the teeth set on edge after vomiting). The acid (*to oxu*), for its part, cuts, divides, thins, opens, purges thoroughly without warming. The pungent (*to drimu*), similarly to the acid, thins and purges thoroughly, but it differs in that the acid cools, while the pungent warms. Besides, the former repels, while the latter draws in and dissipates. Similarly, the bitter (*to pikron*) purges thoroughly the passages, cleanses thoroughly, thins, cuts through thick humours without perceptible heat. The cold watery (*to hudatōdes*) thickens, sets together, brings together, compresses, stupefies and mortifies. The pungent (*to drimu*) thins, purges thoroughly, dissipates, shatters, draws in, and forms eschars. The salty (*to halukon*) brings together, binds fast, preserves, and dries without perceptible heat or coldness. The sweet (*to glukū*) concocts, softens, and makes porous. The oily (*to elaiōdes*) moistens, and softens.³¹

Note how the sweet and the oily have gentle, pleasant qualities compared to the other types of tastes, some of which bind, purge, shatter and even stupefy. Taste was considered to be the sense which, after touch, brought most pleasure and pain to man, and this list

makes it perfectly clear.³² In the ancient, teleological conception of the cosmos, taste was Nature's way to tell man what to seek as food and what to avoid as poison, or what to consume in tiny amounts as drug. Aristotle wrote: "For it is taste which distinguishes between the pleasant and the painful in food, so that one can avoid the latter and pursue the former, and in general taste is an affection of the nutritive element."³³ The sweet was *usually* a sign that a substance was nutritive, whereas the bitter was *usually* a sign that a substance had medicinal qualities.³⁴

According to Theophrastus, pleasant taste was the result of concoction:

We must say ... that both the sweet (and simply nutritive) tastes, and the sweet-smelling odours arise from a certain concoction (*pepsei*) and working up (*katergasiai*), and that these [things that possess good smell and taste] (when taken as a class) are better concocted than the others (this is visible in plants of the same type, for the better concocted have a better flavour and smell than those that are unconcocted), even though each of the two classes is concocted according to its own sort of concoction.³⁵

Ancient natural philosophers distinguished various types of "concoction": that by heat (which in the case of the colocynth, as we saw, improved its taste), that by digestion, and that by maturing.³⁶ In plants, maturing was in itself a form of digestion (the plant took its nutriment from the earth and digested it) that sweetened fruits. Pericarps (fruits) started as very astringent and dry; then, through concoction, they filled with fluid and became sweeter.³⁷ When they dried, fleshy pericarps (such as apples or pears) became even sweeter because they lost their "watery part" and their "earthy part settled", while oily pericarps (nuts and olives) became oilier for the same reason.³⁸ In other plants, such as cereals, the process went from absence of taste to the expected nutritive taste.³⁹ The most useful parts of a plant, then, signalled their usefulness through their sweet taste. Non-sweet parts, however, could be useful in another way, namely as a drug:

[The distinction in taste] is also visible in vegetables. For the leaves are well suited [to man] and pleasant, while the seeds are pungent and too bitter, and on the whole too strong to our senses.

As a result, the case is almost exactly the reverse of what it is in trees and cereals. For in these the fruits are useful to us, while the leaves are useless. In vegetables, however, the leaves alone are useful, whereas the rest functions, as it were, like a drug (*pharmakou*).⁴⁰

For Theophrastus, the seeds of vegetables were not really drugs, but they were almost like drugs, by virtue of their bitter taste. For bitterness was mostly associated with the medicinal. Thus, the bitter, unpleasant taste of wormwood was a good indication of its medical qualities, and in particular of the fact that it could purge bile (*similia similibus*: bile is bitter and can be counteracted by something bitter).⁴¹ Theophrastus noted that the sheep from Pontus were particularly beautiful and fat because they fed on wormwood and therefore had no bile.

The link between bitterness and drug-like powers, however, was not always straightforward, and there were some dangerous exceptions:

Not all sweet flavours are nutritious for us: some cause mental derangement, like the root that is similar to golden thistle and some other roots; some are soporific and, when given in large amounts, are even lethal, like mandrake; and some are admittedly deadly. For many, in many places, have eaten roots that they perceived to be sweet to the taste and pleasant, and died as a result. And many other plants that harm or even kill are sweet or cause no pain when they are first ingested. Then again, some unpleasant and bitter plants are beneficial, as the centaury and wormwood just mentioned, and some others that taste even more drug-like (*pharmakōdesterous*) are also good for us.⁴²

Even honey, the sweetest food of all, had a “sting in its tail”, as it was in fact “bitter” to the digestion, as indicated in a letter attributed to the Emperor Julian the Apostate (but probably not authentic). It was allegedly sent to a certain Serapion and accompanied a gift of a hundred beautiful, dried, home-grown figs:

And Hippocrates says that honey, although it is sweet to the senses, is in fact especially bitter to digest, and I trust his statement. For all agree that honey produces bile and that it turns the humours to the very opposite of its flavour, which convicts it

as having an extremely bitter nature in origin. For it would not change to this bitterness if from the beginning this [quality] had not belonged to it, from which it changed into something else. The fig, on the other hand, is not only sweet to the senses, but it is even more so to digestion. And it is so useful to human beings that Aristotle says that it is an antidote to every deadly poison.⁴³

There is no preserved Hippocratic passage where it is clearly stated that honey has bitter properties. In Dioscorides' description, on the other hand, the properties of honey correspond more to those of a "bitter" substance than those of a "sweet" one: "its properties are purgative, opening, stimulating of the humours, and for that reasons it is helpful to rinse dirty wounds and ulcers".⁴⁴ It is, therefore, possible to assume that honey, although sweet, was considered "bitter" in its power in the ancient world. This perhaps has implications for our understanding of Lucretius' famous description of the honeyed cup. If honey is bitter in power, it might then add to the medicinal quality of the wormwood draught.

There were also various bitter and/or poisonous honeys known in antiquity: that described by Xenophon (fourth century BCE) as having poisoned the troops when they crossed the land of the Colchians (on the Black Sea, modern Georgia);⁴⁵ the honey of Sardinia, bitter because the bees producing it feed on wormwood;⁴⁶ and the poisonous honey from Heracleia Pontica (on the Black Sea, modern Turkey).⁴⁷ When he gives advice on bee-keeping, the fifth-century agronomist Palladius lists the plants that will create the sweetest honey (thyme, violets, asphodel and iris) and those that should be avoided: "these herbs too should be absent: spurge, hellebore, thapsia, wormwood, wild cucumber, and all bitterness that is adverse to the creation of sweetness".⁴⁸

With the references to apiculture, we have entered the topic of cultivation. I will now discuss more fully the ways in which the ancients attempted to change the taste of plants through agriculture.

Culture and taste

Plants had inherent qualities, but habitat also contributed to qualities, and hence to taste. Indeed, the soil gave plants their food, and therefore contributed to their nutritive and medicinal powers, which manifested themselves through taste.⁴⁹ As the ancients had observed this link between plant habitat and taste (the *terroir* effect), they

puzzled over some problems linked to plant tastes.⁵⁰ In particular, they asked why no fruit was salty in taste, a question which they answered in various, rather complex ways.⁵¹ The ancients also conducted experiments on how to improve the taste of plants by changing their habitat or food. Theophrastus stated that husbandry transformed the flavour of plants by changing their food and gave various examples illustrating this principle.⁵² For instance, he explained what happens to the taste of cabbage when it was watered with soda water:

Some people mix soda to water when they water cabbage, as in Egypt, and it then becomes much sweeter and tenderer, as is the case when it is boiled [in salt water]. This happens (and in general salinity is beneficial) because these [vegetables] have a certain bitterness in their nature, and the salt water, by passing through [the plants] and as it were opening them up, draws this bitterness out (and for that reason cabbage fares best in briny soil). And the bitter is non-nutritive and ill-flavoured, so that, when it is removed, these plants become sweeter, tenderer, and grow better; whereas the others [i.e. plants that do not have bitterness in themselves] become worse because the salt water does not draw out what is alien but rather what is proper to the plant, and scorches it in the process.⁵³

Theophrastus goes on to say that, in other plants where pungency is a sought-after characteristic (onion and garlic), salt water harms the plant by drawing out its pungency, stressing the similarity between the salt and bitter flavours. Elsewhere, Theophrastus explains how various types of manure are used to change the taste of plants (swine manure makes pomegranates and almonds sweet) or how to soak cucumbers in milk to make them sweeter.⁵⁴ Theophrastus gives highly technical explanations of what happens to these plants when husbandmen alter their taste. These theories are based on the notions of the four elements and powers and a thorough understanding of plant physiology. That being said, Theophrastus relied on sources that were directly involved in growing plants; his theories are based on empirical research.⁵⁵ People in antiquity truly sought to alter the taste of plants through cultivation.

Theophrastus also noticed that cultivation negatively affected the taste (and hence properties) of some plants:

Hence it is reasonable that husbandry should not be beneficial to certain plants, such as those that are dry, pungent and bitter, and put simply, those that are drug-like (*pharmakōdē*) and useful to us in this manner. For they are made effeminate (*ekthēlunetai*) when their powers are removed, and some do not even carry fruit at all, others [carry] fruits that are watery and inferior, and the plants themselves become more watery, as in the case of wormwood, centaury and in general all plants with drug-like properties, whether those are to be found in the root, the fruit or the branches. The same goes for those plants that must have a certain pungency in taste, among which there appear to be caper, silphium, dock, savory and thyme. For some of these do not grow at all on cultivated lands, or grow poorly, while others are inferior, like dock, savory and caper; some even get a sweet taste, as they become too wet and full of food For agriculture produces the opposite [of the nature of the plant], as we have said, by providing excessive nourishment.⁵⁶

This passage, which is filled with taste-related vocabulary, states clearly that agriculture works against the nature of plants, and tends to produce sweeter tastes. A sweeter fruit or root may be pleasant as food, but it is in general the sign that the plant is over-fed, and therefore not as healthy as a wild plant. It is a plant that has become effeminate and sterile, which is different from a plant that is “female in nature” – ancient plants were sometimes attributed a gender, and in one case, the radish, the female type was said to have a better taste than the male.⁵⁷ This link between cultivation, taste and gender is worth pursuing a bit further, since throughout antiquity, husbandry remained the male activity that transforms and tames the female earth.⁵⁸ Ovid played on this trope at the beginning of his poem “Cosmetics for the Female Face”, a poem that includes “real” recipes for cosmetics:

Learn how to beautify your face, young girls
And the means to retain what is worth keeping!
Culture (*cultus*) orders the sterile ground to produce Ceres’
Gifts; and thence the biting brambles die;
Culture (*cultus*) in fruit improves the sour tastes (*sucos acerbos*),
And the grafted tree [literally: broken], she bears adopted
treasures.⁵⁹

Ovid here fully exploits the polyvalence of the notion of *cultus*, which covers our “cultivation”, “education” and “physical beautification”. He ends this passage with a reference to grafting, an art in which the Romans excelled, and through which they created the most delicious fruits. The Roman agronomical writers M. Terentius Varro (116–27 BCE) and L. Iunius Moderatus Columella (first century CE), as well as Pliny the Elder, devoted long passages to this art of improving taste through grafting.⁶⁰ The later agronomist Palladius (fifth century CE) even wrote a short poem on the topic (*On Grafting* (*De insitione*)), in imitation of Columella’s book ten, a poem on horticulture, itself an offshoot of Virgil’s *Georgics*.

Interestingly, when he refers to his verses, Columella mentions their taste: “But when, Publius Silvinus, you persistently asked for a taste (*gustum*) of my verses, I could not keep on refusing.”⁶¹ As cultivation could improve the taste of fruits, verse could improve the taste of difficult technical topics. I have no doubt Columella was here responding to the well-known verses of Lucretius and Ovid, where taste and knowledge are brought together.⁶² The pun would not have worked in Greek, but in Latin the educated poet could be called a “man of taste”.

Conclusion

Ancient botanical and medical writers described in great detail the taste of natural substances and developed complex theories to explain the generation of flavour. At either end of the taste spectrum were the sweet and the bitter, typified respectively by honey and wormwood. These two substances were also respectively symbolic of cultivation and wilderness. Indeed, wormwood was a wild plant, growing mainly on mountains, whose taste could only be “emasculated” by cultivation, while the best honey was produced through apiculture. There were, to be sure, wild honeys, but these could be bitter and poisonous, especially if bees had fed on wormwood. Thus honey and wormwood were antithetical, but we also noted that, while wormwood showed its true powers through its taste, the sweetness of honey hid bitter powers. Perhaps honey and wormwood were not so different from each other in their effect on the body. In any case, these two products came together in numerous medicinal preparations; they also came together in metaphors indicating that the sweet can usefully hide the bitter, or that the bitter is sometimes lurking behind the

sweet. And no doubt, one of the sweetest – but also at times controversial and dangerous – things a natural philosopher, agronomist or medical writer could produce was fine prose or poetry. They often did and fully engaged with the imagery associated with sweet honey and bitter wormwood.

- 1Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* (*De rerum natura*) 1.936–42. All translations are mine.
- 2On taste metaphors, see Gowers (Chapter 5). On atomist conceptions of taste, see Rudolph's Chapter 2; on the sexual connotations of tasting in Lucretius, see Rudolph's introduction to this volume.
- 3See for instance Hippocratic Corpus, *Nature of Women* (*De natura muliebri*) 109 (Loeb 322 Potter; 7.428 Littré) in a pessary; Galen, *On the Composition of Medicines by Places in the Body* (*De compositione medicamentorum secundum locos*) 3.1 (12.664 Kühn) in a remedy for the ears. It is conventional to refer to most ancient medical texts by giving the name of the editor (in the second reference: Kühn), the volume in which the text is to be found (here 12) and the page at which the passage is to be found (here 664). I refer to the Littré edition of the Hippocratic texts and the Kühn edition of the Galenic texts, available free online: "Bibliothèque numérique Medic@", www.bium.univ-paris5.fr/histmed/medica.htm (accessed May 2017), as well as mentioning newer editions when available (giving preference to editions that contain a translation into English). The abbreviation CMG refers to the *Corpus Medicorum Graecorum*. This is also available free online: "Corpus Medicorum Graecorum/Latinorum", <http://cmg.bbaw.de/epubl/online/editionen.html> (accessed May 2017). The abbreviation CUF refers to the Collection des Universités de France. I have also listed translations of medical texts when available separately from text editions.
- 4Fr. 708 Kock. For other examples of this metaphorical use, mainly in religious texts, see Fredrikson (2003).
- 5There is very little scholarly literature on the sense of taste in ancient medicine and botany. See Jouanna (2003) for the senses in Hippocratic medicine; Siegel (1970) and Nutton (1993) for the senses in Galen's works; Sharples (1985) for taste and smell in Theophrastus' work.
- 6Baker (Chapter 8) highlights the complexity of using taste terms in relation to notions of health.
- 7Theophrastus may have discussed taste in some other writings, see Sharples (1985) and bibliography given there. The best edition of *Enquiry into Plants* (*De historia plantarum*) is that by Amigues for the CUF (1988–2006). Amigues' translation is also available as a single volume, beautifully illustrated (2010). The edition and English translation by Sir Arthur Hort (1916) is also useful. *On the Causes of Plants* (*De causis plantarum*) is available in an edition and translation by Einarson and Link (1976–90).
- 8Galen, *On the Mixing and Powers of Simple Remedies* (*De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis et facultatibus*) 7.10.13 (12.15 Kühn). Dioscorides describes the plant caucalis at *Materia medica* 2.139, also comparing it to daucus, but not mentioning its taste. He does, however, mention that caucalis was used as a vegetable both raw and boiled. Identifications of plants are those proposed by Beck (2005) in her translation of Dioscorides' *On Medical Material* (*De materia medica*). For an introduction to Galen's pharmacology, see Vogt (2008). For an introduction to ancient medicine in general, see Nutton (2013). Information on most medical and

- scientific writers mentioned in this chapter can be found in Keyser and Irby-Massie (2008). For taste and food in Galen's work, see Baker ([Chapter 8](#)).
- 9Dioscorides, *On Medical Material* 4.120. For an introduction to Dioscorides, see Riddle (1985). For a translation into English of his works, see Beck (2005).
- 10Galen, *On the Mixing and Powers of Simple Remedies* 6.1.5 (11.813 Kühn).
- 11Plato, *Timaeus* 65c–66c. The passage is difficult: see Grube (1930). See Rudolph ([Chapter 2](#)) for more detail on taste in the ancient philosophical tradition.
- 12Aristotle, *On the Soul* (*De anima*) 422b11–15; *On the Senses* (*De sensu*) 442a13–29.
- 13Aristotle, *On the Soul* 422a8–19.
- 14Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 6.1.1.
- 15Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 6.4.1–2. See Boulay ([Chapter 11](#)) for the taste of wine.
- 16Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 6.11.1.
- 17Pliny, *Natural History* (*Historia naturalis*) 15.106. See also Boulay ([Chapter 11](#)) and Paulas ([Chapter 12](#)).
- 18Galen, *On the Mixing and Powers of Simple Remedies* 4.6–21 (11.634–96 Kühn).
- 19On Galen's discussion of sense perception, see Siegel (1970).
- 20Galen, *Against Lycus* (*Adversus Lycum*) 4 (18a.222 Kühn).
- 21Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* (*De alimentorum facultatibus*) 2.3 (6.561–2 Kühn). For an English translation of this treatise, see Powell (2003). For other discussions of blandness, see e.g. Aristotle, *On the Senses* 441a4–23 (on water); Pliny *Natural History* 15.108.
- 22For more information on healthy diets see Baker ([Chapter 8](#)).
- 23Orabasius, *Medical Collection* 14.5, CMG 6.1.2, p. 185 Raeder.
- 24Galen, *On the Mixing and Powers of Simple Remedies* 8.18.5 (12.118 Kühn).
- 25Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.59 (6.647 Kühn); see also 1.1 (6.476 Kühn).
- 26Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 6.9.1. On smell in Theophrastus, see Baltussen (2015).
- 27Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 6.9.3.
- 28See Totelin (2015a). Cicero described perfumes as having tastes: *On the Orator* (*De oratore*) 3.99, see Pliny, *Natural History* 17.39.
- 29Galen, *On the Mixing and Powers of Simple Remedies* 4.22 (11.697 Kühn) for the example of garlic.
- 30Aristotle, *On the Soul* 421a28–30.
- 31Orabasius, *Medical Collection* 14.5, CMG 6.1.2, pp. 185–6 Raeder. On softening as a literary metaphor, see Telò ([Chapter 4](#)).
- 32Galen, *On the Causes of Symptoms* (*De symptomatum causis*) 1.6 (7.115 Kühn). A translation of this text is available in Johnston (2006).
- 33Aristotle, *On the Senses* 436b16–18.
- 34On the links between taste and medicinal qualities, see Baker ([Chapter 8](#)).
- 35Theophrastus, *Causes of Plants* 6.6.2. Several “problems” in the twenty-second book of the Aristotelian *Problems* (*Problemata*) 930a14–38 also discuss the link between concoction and sweet taste in foods.
- 36On the phenomenon of digestion, see e.g. Aristotle, *On Respiration* (*De respiratione*) 474a5–b9.
- 37Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 6.6.5.
- 38Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 6.7.4.
- 39Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 6.6.7.
- 40Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 6.12.7.
- 41For a description of the properties of wormwood, see Dioscorides, *On Medical Material* 3.23.
- 42Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 6.4.5–6. I discuss this passage (and give the

same translation) in Totelin (2015b).

- 43Pseudo-Julian, *Epistle* 24. The citation of Aristotle is fr. 276 Rose. On digestibility, see Baker ([Chapter 8](#)).
- 44Dioscorides, *On Medical Material* 2.82.1.
- 45Xenophon, *The Persian Expedition (Anabasis)* 4.8.20–1.
- 46Dioscorides, *On Medical Material* 2.82.4.
- 47Dioscorides, *On Medical Material* 2.82.4; Pliny, *Natural History* 21.74. On these poisonous honeys, see Fredrikson (2003).
- 48Palladius, *The Work of Farming (Opus agriculturae)* 1.37.
- 49See in particular Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 6.13.3–5.
- 50On the link between *terroir* and taste, see Boulay ([Chapter 11](#)) and Banducci ([Chapter 7](#)).
- 51See for instance Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 6.10.1; Plutarch, *Natural Questions (Quaestiones naturales)* 10.5, 913b.
- 52Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 3.1.3.
- 53Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 2.5.3–4.
- 54Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 3.9.3.
- 55Theophrastus, in his *Enquiry into Plants* names gardeners (7.2.5), honey-makers (6.2.3) and woodcutters (3.3.7) among others as his sources.
- 56Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 3.1.3–4.
- 57Palladius, *The Work of Farming* 9.5.2.
- 58There is much literature on the topic. See e.g. DuBois (1988) and King (1994). See Telò ([Chapter 4](#)) on how taste is used as a metaphor for the emasculation of tuna-like Ajax.
- 59Ovid, “Cosmetics for the Female Face” (*Medicamina faciei femineae*) 1–6. On the subsequent recipes see Green (1979).
- 60See Pease (1933) and Lowe (2010).
- 61Columella, *On Agriculture (De re rustica)* 11.1.1.
- 62On the link between taste and knowledge in ancient philosophy, see Rudolph’s discussion in the [previous chapter](#).

Tastes of Homer

Matro's gastroaesthetic tour through epic

Mario Telò

The cakes understood, the tarts were talkative. There was in the former an insipid taste of cream, in the latter a fresh taste of fruit which knew all about ... Gilberte.

(Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*)

In the parabasis of the revised *Clouds*, Aristophanes depicts the unsuccessful performance of the play's first version as a gustatory experience, designated by the verb *anageuō* ("give a taste", line 523), which he generously offered to the undiscerning palate of his audience.¹ Elsewhere, Aristophanes assimilates Euripides' style to a variegated mix of vegetables and spices.² The underlying principle of this figurative assimilation is that poetry is an edible commodity, as we see in another play, where a character, asked how to eat the verses of the bland poet Sthenelus, responds, "by dipping them in vinegar and ... salt".³ In this chapter I explore this notion of edible poetry, making the case for a model of sensuous reception informed by taste.⁴ To achieve this goal, I consider a fourth-century BCE parodic text, the *Attic Dinner Party* (*Deipnon*) by Matro of Pitane, which presents the tantalizing possibility of reading Homer through gustatory aesthetics.

Matro's extant corpus comprises a 122-line portion of the *Attic Dinner Party*, as well as a few shorter fragments, all transmitted by Athenaeus in the *Deipnosophists* – a second-century CE encyclopaedic reflection upon Greek culinary culture. The work belongs to a late-classical tradition of gastronomic writing, often composed in epic-style hexameters and blending Old and Middle Comedy's interest in food with a discourse of luxury elaborated outside Athens, especially in Sicily.⁵ Other examples include an aphrodisiac cookbook by Philoxenus of Leucas, cited by the late fifth-century comedian Plato in his play *Phaon*,⁶ a dithyrambic poem, probably by a different Philoxenus, with the same title as Matro's work (*Deipnon*);⁷ and a fish

recipe book entitled *Life of Luxury* (*Hēdupatheia*), by Arcestratus of Gela, in the didactic mode of Hesiod.⁸ Arcestratus and Matro are the best-known practitioners of the food-themed parodic epic (conceived for private symposia or for public performance), which raises to generic autonomy the episodes of gastronomic debasement of Homer, already apparent in fifth-century Old Comedy.⁹ Matro's assimilation of Homer as the raw material for his textualized feast is so sustained that his poem is almost a cento. His longest fragment affords the opportunity to see how reading and tasting commingle and, thus, to extend the Aristophanic notion of literary reception as a sensation of the palate.¹⁰

Matro's cento describes a Lucullan meal by artfully reusing and recombining epic morsels, thereby materializing the Homeric oeuvre as a textual banquet.¹¹ As I will argue, the consumption of epic textuality that defines Matro's parodic experiment envisages a connection between Homeric characters and their readers based on taste – the most intimate sense, as Rudolph illustrated in the introduction and Warren explores in [Chapter 6](#).¹² Textual surfaces are greedily appropriated to conjure gustatory textures, which in turn evoke corporeal forms and sexual pleasures.¹³ The Homeric corpus is fragmented into an assortment of signature characters in culinary trappings. This operation involves a further anatomizing procedure, reducing heroines and even heroes to bodily parts served up as gourmet delicacies to a voyeuristic reader.¹⁴

Even if the visuals described by Matro are “meant for the eye alone”, the gustatory sensations that they suggest acquire an affective dimension, engaging the reader in a form of “visceral” and “fleshy” connection with the Homeric text and its personages.¹⁵ Matro's jocular gastrofetishism projects the idea of taste as a powerful tactile sensation, enabling readers to conceptualize their imaginary experiences of epic characters as carnal encounters and affording them the illusion of possessing the fictional bodies that are the object of their fantasies.

Matro seems to enact the Aristotelian principle that “what can be tasted is something that can be touched”.¹⁶ While recounting a flat cake's spectacular entrance into the dining room, the ego narrator of the *Attic Dinner Party* – a parasitic guest at the feast he describes – declares, “How could I then abstain from the divine cake? Not even if I had ten hands, and ten mouths, and the stomach were impervious, and my heart inside were made of bronze.”¹⁷ In this remake of the Homeric “many mouths” topos, used to express the bard's verbal

aporia,¹⁸ the replacement of the original “voice” (*phōnē*) with “stomach” (*gastēr*) recasts sonic production as gustatory consumption, phonic emission as gastric ingestion, refashioning the locus of poetic generation as a receiving orifice that directs pleasures from the upper to the lower body.¹⁹ But what is perhaps more striking is that the “ten tongues” opening the Homeric *adynaton* give way to “ten hands”, not only flagging the necessarily tactile dimension of the ancient dining experience (predating the use of cutlery), but also programmatically construing the Matronian text’s sensory quality as synaesthetic – an oral touch or haptic taste.²⁰

Matro’s appropriation of the “many mouths” cliché encapsulates the sense of fragmentation – textual, culinary and bodily – which is characteristic of his gastroaesthetic parody. Here, independently functioning body parts mirror the cento’s splitting of the Homeric corpus into pieces.²¹ Indeed, the Greek verb *geuō* – “taste”, but also occasionally “test, touch, feel” – reveals how fragmentation is essential to the inter-sensory link between taste and touch. Etymologically linked with the English *choose*, *geuō* hints at the quintessential anatomizing force of gustation while also inviting us to see the cento’s playful poetics of selection and dissection as gustatory and haptic.²²

In what follows I retrace Matro’s cook’s tour through epic by illustrating his gastronomic manipulation of Homeric sounds, meanings and contexts. To do so, I will sample a trio of characters (Nausicaa, Thetis, Ajax), whose psychophysical identities, literary biographies and symbolic valences are apportioned as edible textures and voluptuous flavours to savour erotically. This analysis will show how Matro’s gustatory reading of Homer, which brings out the sensual energy of famous scenes and characters, suggests playfully destabilizing ways of affectively engaging with them.

Nausicaa, doughy and creamy

I love the sensuality of bread, its roundness – there is something sexual and womanly about it.

(Jean Paul Gaultier)

In this section I recapture a highly programmatic parallelism of bodily and gastronomic taste in the *Attic Dinner Party*’s prologue, which reads as follows:

δεῖπνά μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα, πολυτρόφα καὶ μάλα πολλὰ,
 ἃ Ξενοκλῆς ῥήτωρ ἐν Ἀθήναις δείπνισεν ἡμᾶς·
 ἦλθον γὰρ κάκεῖσε, πολλὺς δέ μοι ἔσπετο λιμός·
 οὗ δὴ καλλίστους ἄρτους ἶδον ἢ δὲ μεγίστους,
 λευκοτέρους χιόνος, ἔσθειν δ' ἀμύλοισιν ὁμοίους·
 τῶν καὶ Βορέης ἠράσσατο πεσσομενάων.

Tell me, Muse, of the much-nourishing and very abundant dinners, which Xenocles the orator served to us in Athens; for I went there too, and a great hunger followed me. There I saw the finest and largest loaves of bread, whiter than snow, similar to sweet cakes in taste; with these the North Wind fell in love as they were baking.²³

In the first line, blatantly modelled on the *Odyssey*'s proem, the epithet *polutropha* ("much-nourishing") layers Matro's parodic work with the same edibility as its subject matter. Through a minimal adjustment (the aspiration of a labial), Matro connects his theme, the "much-nourishing dinner" (*deipna* ... *polutropha*) supplied by Xenocles, with the "versatile" (*polutropon*) nature of Odysseus.²⁴ In so doing, he appropriates for his poetic enterprise the convergence of subject matter and text conveyed by *polutropos*, which in the *Odyssey* expresses both the hero's proverbial "many ways" and the narration's multiple twists and turns, its disruptions of temporal linearity.²⁵ By blurring the distinction between *deipna* – a poetic plural resonant with the *Odyssey*'s opening word, *andra* ("man") – and *Deipnon* (the likely title of Matro's work), this proem not only casts a measure of doubt on the veracity of the feast about to be described, but more importantly invites the reader to approach the upcoming account as tasteable.²⁶

But what is the meaning of the intertextual pun *deipna* / *andra*, and in what sense can Matro's dinner be perceived as Odyssean? As we will see, the fare in this para-epic feast is human flesh, mostly female but occasionally also that of *andres* ("men"). The analysis that follows shows that what confers an Odyssean flavour upon the parade of delicacies is not only the parasitic persona of the text's ego narrator, reminiscent of Odysseus in his beggar's disguise, but also the play on *poulupous* ("octopus") – the succulent sea creature that embodies the "polytropic" nature of Odysseus evoked by *polutrophos*.²⁷ With its sensual intensity and the affective impact of its description, the text is imbued with an aphrodisiacal taste similar to that of its molluscan counterpart.

In lines three to six a complex of epic quotations and potentially

erotic images (snowy whiteness and mares) recasts a culinary experience as the encounter between Odysseus and Nausicaa. Line three reproduces Odysseus' reference to his visit to Delos, the site where, he tells Nausicaa, he gazed in awe at the shoot of the palm tree to which he famously likens her.²⁸ The only divergence from the Homeric hypotext, *limos* ("hunger") in lieu of *laos* ("people"), enhances the evocative density of the quotation, aligning the parasitic narrator's hungry stomach with Odysseus' leonine *gastēr*, the venue of the sexually charged appetite that marks his first glimpse of Nausicaa.²⁹ In the following line of Matro, the recollection of luscious loaves of bread continues the re-creation of the Odyssean scene's sensual atmosphere with erotically flavoured textual morsels from the Iliadic descriptions of Rhesus' horses³⁰ and of Erichthonius' mares, loved by Boreas.³¹ The verb *ērassato* ("fell in love", line 6) transfers to the baked enticements the eroticism of the equines, which in the post-Homeric poetic tradition frequently figure the sexual inexperience and allure of maidens like Nausicaa.³² In this context, the loaves' snowiness (line 5), borrowed from Rhesus' horses,³³ acquires sensual connotations too, conjuring the paleness required of young women by the ancient canons of female aesthetics.³⁴ It is not coincidental that in *Odyssey* 6 Nausicaa is twice pictured as "white-armed" (*leukōlenos*), an adjective that Matro's narrator employs for other foods with womanly features.³⁵ The disparate Homeric bits assembled in this part of the prologue thus seem to expand on the intertextual memory of Odysseus' Delian journey, reshaping its broader narrative context – a desirous interplay between a male viewer and potential female prey – as an act of beholding and consuming eroticized comestibles.

An icon of sensuality as well as bounty, bread captures Nausicaa's double role as erotic object and wifely paradigm.³⁶ In a fragment from Arcestratus' *Life of Luxury*, a loaf of freshly baked bread is viewed through the overlapping metaphorical domains of virginal beauty and botanical development: "a white loaf, blooming with soft grace, will give pleasure at dinner".³⁷ The collocation of "soft" (*habrais*) with "blooming" (*thallōn*) assimilates the soft consistency of leavened bread to the tenderness of a growing plant, while intimating the affinity of floury pleasures with the sensual joys supplied by other blossoming commodities – not food, but young female bodies.³⁸ Read against Odysseus' comparison of Nausicaa to a burgeoning palm (*Odyssey* 6.157, 163), this passage strengthens the link between bread and the Phaeacian princess in Matro's prologue. As a tribute to Nausicaa's physical charm, the Odyssean simile expresses the scene's sexual

tension yet tempers it by embedding the praise within a proto-epithalamic framework, which exploits the symbolic power of natural regeneration to elevate the maiden to the position of the ideal wife.³⁹ In channelling male sexual aggression towards biological reproduction, Nausicaa's body can be seen as a rendition in human flesh of bread's voluptuousness and sustenance.

Matro ascribes tastes to the Odyssean loaves that are tinged with an ambiguity between titillating sensuality and maternal nourishment, which is inherent in the bosom. In the second half of line five, Matro swaps letters to turn the airy into solid matter, the winds equalled by Rhesus' speedy horses (*theiein d' anemoisin homoioi*, *Iliad* 10.437) into the "creamy cakes" (*amuloi*) that Xenocles' bread matches in texture and taste (*esthein d' amuloisin homoious*, l.5). The delicate consistency of these cakes, "made of wheat ... worked into a paste" and smeared in milk, cheese and honey, has a distinctly erotic feel, bringing to the palate the tactile softness of female breasts.⁴⁰ Similar sensuality is exuded by a fragment of Anaxandrides,⁴¹ where *amuloi* are on the table of a lavish wedding banquet and the comic poet plays on the punning doubleness of *mazōn* (the genitive plural of *maza*, "barley-cake", is phonetically equivalent to that of *mastos*, "breast"). Anaxandrides merges festive pastries with bridal breasts, synaesthetically converting a vision of edible roundness into a fantasy of both haptic and gustatory pleasures.⁴² The female allure and nuptial relevance of the *amuloi* are also reflected in the epithet "pregnant" applied to them in a fragment of Plato the comedian.⁴³ The milky taste of Xenocles' loaves goes along with the anatomical suggestion. Savouring bread's "soft pillowy mattressiness" and "well-sprung bounciness" allows Xenocles' guests to experience a form of sexual intimacy with the female upper body, but also, to regress to the comforting nurture of the maternal bosom.⁴⁴ Thus, we could say that the Matronian bread, a version of Nausicaa's bust, offers a sensual demonstration of the Freudian connection between sexual satisfaction and infantile nourishment.⁴⁵

In dishing out, as it were, Nausicaa's breasts, Matro's prologue advertises the sensually voracious reception of Homer, promising to feed a male reader's almost pornographic desire for physical assimilation of epic bodies. The reduction of Nausicaa's bosom to doughy softness actualizes the sexual energy latent in Odysseus' leonine gaze, where blazing eyes threaten predatory violence.⁴⁶ In Matro's prologue, "I saw" (*idon*) underscores the narrator's appropriation of Odysseus' gaze, but the verb's object, "the most

beautiful loaves”, augurs satiation of the original visual appetite.⁴⁷ In other passages, the Matronian narrator explicitly attributes a leonine grasp to himself and a fellow parasite.⁴⁸ The revamped Odyssean gaze, endowed with anatomizing force and tactile urgency, pertains not only to the narrator of Matro’s poem, but also to its reader, who, while vicariously enjoying Xenocles’ textualized dinner, absorbs its aphrodisiacal properties. The gastronomic metamorphosis of Nausicaa amounts to a revisionary filling of the physical and affective distance between the young princess and Odysseus, but also between her and her beholders outside the text. Instead of the purely visual, detached encounter with Nausicaa offered in the Homeric scene, Matro presents the tantalizing oral proximity of her creamy and fragrant skin to the reader. Thus, the fantasies engendered by the Homeric text are fuelled and in some sense fulfilled. The Odyssean scene’s “scopophilic” force, to use Mulvey’s term, is brought to its logical outcome (tactile and gustatory) – although still operating within the imaginary realm.⁴⁹ Matro’s text is as sensually vibrant as the bread that sets in motion the gustatory journey.

With the appearance of porridge, a different presentation of wheaten and milky smoothness emphasizes the reassuringly *polutrophos* over the merely lascivious. After the digestive challenge of a parade of seafood, which will occupy us in the next two sections, the dining guests put their hands on “sweet-faced porridge, which Hephaestus boiled with much toil, cooking it in an Attic pot for thirteen months”.⁵⁰ Two elements connect this version of the ultimate *polutrophos* food with the female upper body: the epithet “sweet-faced” (*hēduprosōpos*), which brings to mind “the face and arms of an aristocratic woman”,⁵¹ and the epic snippet processed here, namely Hephaestus’ crafting of Diomedes’ breastplate.⁵² This porridge, intertextually connected with the chest, is itself the outcome of an absurdly long cooking process, a kind of gestation that only heightens its maternal connotations. This dish revives the textures (both material and symbolic) of the prologue’s loaves, bringing into focus their nourishing power, a balm for the stomach like the soothing effect of Matro’s parodic playfulness on its sexy cuisine.⁵³

Another floury dish, arguably marking a closural moment in the poem, programmatically acts out sensual enjoyment and nourishment as the two complementary sides of taste.⁵⁴ The personified cake that triggers the narrator’s stomach- and hand-oriented take on the “many mouths” cliché looks back to Nausicaa’s doughiness:

ὥς δὲ ἶδον ξανθὸν γλυκερὸν μέγαν ἔγκυκλον, ἄνδρες,
Δήμητρος παῖδ' ὅπτὸν ἐπεισελθόντα πλακοῦντα,
πῶς ἂν ἐπειτα πλακοῦντος ἐγὼ θείου ἀπεχοίμην.

But, gentlemen, when I saw the blond, sweet, large, round, baked child of Demeter coming in, how could I then abstain from that divine flat cake?⁵⁵

The cake's distinctive attributes signal its obvious kinship with the honey-tasting, curvaceous and “very large” (*megistous*) loaves of the prologue. Combined with the vocative *andres* (“men”), the verb “I saw” (*idon*) positions the appreciation of this delicacy within the voyeuristic atmosphere surrounding the evocation of Nausicaa's floury beauty. Such a gastronomic sight reconfigures Hades' visual contact with the young Persephone before her rape – an unrealized outcome of the encounter between Odysseus and Nausicaa.⁵⁶ As a stand-in for the verbal matter that sets off the Iliadic archetype of the “many mouths” topos,⁵⁷ the cake objectifies Matro's text, materializing its ability to gratify the sexually hungry stomach of the Odyssean ego narrator and the “comrades” (*andres*) who form his audience. But as an embodiment of fertility, Persephone infuses this self-reflexively layered cake with the wholesome taste of maternal abundance.⁵⁸ Indeed, the author's own name – *Matrōn*, resonant with the root **māter* (Attic *mētēr*; Doric *matēr*) – seems to elevate the nourishing dimension of the *Attic Dinner Party* to a primary marker of textual identity.⁵⁹ In promoting the nourishing over the sensual, is this text deceptively hiding its piquant flavours in a maternal concoction? Or is it trying to soften its carnal reading of Homer with a playfulness that, in the economy of the poem, introduces easy digestibility to its risqué dishes?

The wheaten milkiness that evokes Nausicaa in Matro's prologue provides the ideal flavour for launching his gustatory tour of Homer. In the *Odyssey*, her encounter with Odysseus signals a new beginning after his imprisonment in the cave of Calypso – one of the poem's *femmes fatales*.⁶⁰ Starch “coats the tongue and calms down or diffuses more strident tastes”.⁶¹ As we will see in the next section, Matro reverses the Homeric sequence of female flavours by placing a Calypsan dish after Nausicaa's floury texture. We can thus say that Nausicaa's appearance at the beginning of the *Dinner Party* provides a suitable first course, which, to borrow the words of two modern chefs, prepares the reader “for the ... fusillade of strong flavour” to follow.⁶²

Thetis, fishy and funky

While other ingredients ... pull tastes up into more defined and ethereal areas of flavour, funky ingredients pull all of them back into their basic organic origins.

(Kunz & Kaminsky 2001: 11)

Have you ever tasted a Whitstable oyster?

(Sarah Waters, *Tipping the Velvet*)

The core of Matro's dinner consists of an uninterrupted series of seafood dishes: among others, oysters and sea urchins. Let us concentrate on one of them, a cuttlefish resembling and bearing the name of Thetis:⁶³

ἦλθε δὲ Νηρηῖος θυγάτηρ, Θέτις ἀργυρόπεζα,
σηπίη εὐπλόκαμος, δεινὴ θεὸς αὐδήεσσα,
ἦ μόνη ἰχθυὺς ἐοῦσα τὸ λευκὸν καὶ μέλαν οἶδε

Then the daughter of Nereus, silver-footed Thetis came, the cuttlefish with lovely tresses, the dreaded goddess talking to mortals, the only fish who knows white and black.⁶⁴

The quotations in this passage conflate Thetis the cuttlefish with Calypso and Circe. The first line condenses elements of Thetis' epic identity (marine genealogy, "silver-footedness") by citing a passage from the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* that concerns her rescue of Hephaestus when Hera threw him into the sea.⁶⁵ In the following line, this suggestion of enfolding protection is jarringly combined with a reference to the physical attributes that, in the *Odyssey*, mark Circe and Calypso as almost interchangeable exemplars of the "dread goddess" (*deinē theos*): slinky curls and, above all, a seductive voice.⁶⁶ The presence of "soft-haired cuttlefish-octopuses" (*sēpiopoullopodeiōn ... hapaloplokamōn*) in Philoxenus' gastronomic catalogue (*PMG* fr. 836b.12–13) indicates that the tender tentacles of the snowy mollusc can be compared to the charming tresses that Circe and Calypso share with *ēukomos* ("lovely-haired") or *kalliplokamos* ("beautiful-haired") Thetis.⁶⁷ But how does the taste of the cuttlefish connect with a reader's experience of the apparently incompatible models of epic femininity mobilized here – protective Thetis on one side, tempting Calypso and Circe on the other?

The association of Thetis with the cuttlefish (*sēpiē*) originates from

her Protean behaviour before mating with Peleus at Cape Sepias in Thessaly.⁶⁸ As noted by Detienne and Vernant, Matro's mention of the cuttlefish's discernment of white and black picks up multiple aspects of this mollusc's *mētis* ("cunning"): its ability to blend into the environment and obfuscate boundaries through its pale body's aggressive emissions of dark ink, as well as its assumption of zebra-like patterns during mating.⁶⁹ This polymorphic nature links the cuttlefish to Thetis. According to a tradition known to Herodotus and Euripides, Thetis, after taking on all the possible shapes to escape from Peleus, finally adopted that of a cuttlefish when he seized her in the Thessalian promontory full of and consequently named after the white molluscs.⁷⁰

Notwithstanding the sources' emphasis on Peleus' subjugation of Thetis, the power dynamic in their tryst at Cape Sepias evokes a Calypso or Circean picture of the marine goddess as devouring, like a cuttlefish.⁷¹ The way the cuttlefish hunts and feeds itself suggests sexual incorporation. Using its long, prehensile tentacles, which Oppian also assimilates to locks of hair, the mollusc lures its prey into its mouth, as Aristotle tells us.⁷² In light of the common equivalence in Greek culture between the mouth and female genitalia, the cuttlefish can thus be seen as an image of the *vagina dentata*, the castrating woman.⁷³ Far from a capitulation to Peleus, the metamorphosis into a cuttlefish reaffirms the sexual power of Thetis, whose continuous transformations teased her mortal lover, reproducing the coquettish undulations of her tentacular hair.

The finale of Euripides' *Andromache* may support this reading. After promising to the old Peleus a future of immortality in the house of Nereus, Thetis commands him to go back to Cape Sepias and wait for her in the "hollow cave" where their first rendezvous took place.⁷⁴ This order could shed light on the original encounter, humorously construing it as an imperious seductress' manipulation, entrapment and erotic consumption of her victim. The erotic meaning of "hollow cave" (*muchos*) – a common metaphor for female genitalia – may intimate a confusion between the location of the intercourse and the act itself.⁷⁵ Thetis' alleged transition from maiden to wife did not tame her seductive *mētis*, while the young, vigorous Peleus was already as weak as the old one. Understood against this background, Thetis' "reception" (*dexato*) of Hephaestus into the depths of the sea may suggest sexual devouring à la Calypso or Circe.⁷⁶ This is probably the reading that underlies Matro's reconstruction of Thetis' molluscan identity through the unexpected pairing of her cameo in the *Hymn to*

Apollo with the two threatening goddesses of the *Odyssey*.

Behind the epiphany of the cuttlefish on the Matronian table lies the promise of a kind of gustatory intimacy with the female lower body that legitimizes a controversial sexual practice by anchoring it within the appropriate gender hierarchy. The morphology and hunting technique of the cuttlefish cast light on the projection, in ancient and modern times, of male anxieties of castration onto molluscs, assimilated to women and their genitalia.⁷⁷ In antiquity, a fishy taste is attributed to female genitals, as we can infer from the many attacks against the aficionados of cunnilingus – a practice included in the blacklist of heterosexual pleasures because of its perceived violation of the active vs. passive dichotomy.⁷⁸ The plating of the molluscan Thetis together with Calypso and Circe neutralizes their sexual aggression, offering a form of cunnilingus within the norms of erotic roles. The cuttlefish served in Xenocles' dinner, then, elevates the funky taste of fish – and other edibles with moist, slippery surfaces – to the status of delicacy, turning an oral guilty pleasure into a permissible one.

In light of Matro's poetic *mētis* – his overlapping of culinary and sexual flavours – we may see his reading of Hephaestus' fall into the sea as a journey into genital depths, a use of the *Hymn to Apollo* that establishes subversive forms of sensual empathy with epic characters, bodies and spaces. Matro's introduction of the molluscan Thetis through the moment in the hymn where Hera recalls throwing Hephaestus into the sea places the lame god and the consumers of the cuttlefish (in and outside Matro's text) in comparable positions: both enjoy physical contact with the goddess in her natural or animal projections (the sea or the cuttlefish). In the *Hymn to Apollo* (line 320), Hera strips Thetis' deliverance of Hephaestus of the maternal connotations it bears in the *Iliad*. The Iliadic welcoming of Hephaestus into Thetis' bosom (ὑπεδέξατο κόλπῳ, *hupedexato kolpoi*, 18.398) gives way to a mere "reception" (δέξατο, *dexato*), whose evident neutrality may reveal a measure of maternal possessiveness packaged with the earlier rejection.⁷⁹ Matro pushes this ambiguity further, aligning Thetis' intervention with the Circean or Calypsan incorporating power of the cuttlefish. The plunge into the sea and Thetis' reception become separate but related expressions of a narrative of sexual assimilation. The reversed power dynamics that, in Matro, reduce Thetis to a molluscan object of consumption shift Hephaestus' immersion from passive sexual assimilation to active erotic tasting, from a castrating entanglement with marine voraciousness to a safely pleasurable exploration of the female abyss.

Thus, Matro's gustatory reading reanimates the epic textual space as a "pleasurable topograph[y]",⁸⁰ allowing the audience to relive the characters' actions as multi-layered sensual experiences.

We have so far seen how Matro's cento manipulates epic female bodies to engage readers with epic through the enticements of tactile and gustatory enjoyment. In the next section I will take stock of the textual and gastronomic techniques that Matro deploys to make even adult male flesh palatable to his audience.

Ajax, tenderized and plated

The fiery seasonings tingle the tongue while the generous cuts of soft and tender tuna cool the bite.

(*Candice's Cusina*)⁸¹

As an intertextual gallery of characters and stories, the Odyssean *Nekuia* ("visit to the Underworld") provides an obvious precedent for Matro's gastro-epic tour. Still, it is surprising to find the solitary soul⁸² of the rather indigestible Ajax reincarnated as the head of a tuna, his patronymic *Telamōnios* distorted into a marker of marine identity (*thalamēiadao*).⁸³

οἷη δ' αὖ θύννου κεφαλὴ θαλαμηιάδαο
νόσφιν ἀφειστήκει, κεχολωμένη εἵνεκα τευχέων
αἰρομένων· τὸ δὲ πῆμα θεοὶ θέσαν ἀνθρώποισι

Only the head of a tuna, son of fish-lair, stood off at a distance, angry on account of the armour taken away from him; but the gods made this a pain for mortals.⁸⁴

Several aspects of Ajax's character explain this assimilation to tuna: massiveness, bellicosity, unbreakable resistance to external offence and even madness. The gigantic tuna (*hyperballontōs* ... *auxanomenon*), similar to a cetacean (*kētos*), which Athenaeus describes (*Deipnosophists* 7.303c), imports into the marine domain the titanic attributes of the *megas* ("big"), *pelōrios* ("immense, monstrous") Ajax of the *Iliad*. This affinity runs deeper, since as many sources attest, tuna are combative and even organize themselves into phalanx-like formations.⁸⁵ More significant is an endurance that recalls the defensive immobility of Ajax, "the bulwark of the Achaeans".⁸⁶ On the other hand, they are also perceived as crazed creatures, which a

gadfly condemns to Ajax-like insanity every summer.⁸⁷ Thus, the tuna seems a perfect doppelgänger for Ajax. But what is the role of the piscine Ajax in the sensual reading of Homer pursued by Matro? How does the “bulwark of the Achaeans” fit into the gastronomic narration’s playful stirring of culinary and erotic appetites? What does it entail to read the Homeric Ajax through taste?

Tuna requires textural softening. The ancient discourse on seafood posits a fundamental divide between “hard-fleshed” (*sklērosarkoi*) and “soft-fleshed” (*hapalosarkoi*) fish.⁸⁸ According to Archestratus of Gela, while a naturally “soft” texture can – and should – be appreciated with minimal culinary intervention, any fish with “hard” flesh must undergo various tenderizing procedures: in particular, roasting followed by marinating in piquant condiments and cheese.⁸⁹ As we know from modern experience, “the flesh of the tuna is very firm and compact, and rather heavy”.⁹⁰ Ancient sources similarly ascribe “a hard and indigestible flesh”⁹¹ to the big tuna whose head appears in epic disguise on Xenocles’ table. We should therefore imagine that to become palatable the piscine Ajax has been previously subjected to tenderization. Serving only the head of the tuna, one of its isolated zones of delicacy, is in itself a softening camouflage.⁹²

The tenderization that converts Ajax into a seafood commodity produces a flavour that is not just anti-epic, but essentially tragic, as in the Sophoclean treatment of the hero’s softening after his madness.⁹³ The edges of the tuna’s culinary life – capture and plating – parallel the dramatic boundaries of Sophocles’ *Ajax*. While the beginning of the tragedy stages the hero’s entrapment in the net of insanity, casting him as a beast encircled and captured, the ending shows his body laid out horizontally, a human still life that provides a suitable antecedent for Matro’s quasi-ecphrastic plating of the Ajax-like tuna.⁹⁴ In one of the deceptive speeches that follow the realization of his delirious action, Ajax claims that his “hard (*periskeleis*)” temperament (line 649) has been “caught” (line 648) and his tongue has been feminized by Tecmessa (line 651), who, perceiving his suicidal thoughts, had urged him to “soften up” (*malassou*) his attitude (line 594). It is clear that Ajax’s professed “reversal of disposition from hard to soft, rigid to flexible”, albeit false, “matches his change of stature from defended and impervious to naked and vulnerable”.⁹⁵ The subsequent display and objectification of his body, which Tecmessa and Teucrus strive to protect from exposure (and, consequently, dogs and birds), suggests vulnerability, a softening of heroic flesh, which is characteristic of the affective

experience of tragedy as a whole.⁹⁶ Matro's metamorphosis of Ajax into edible tuna – violently captured, tenderized, plated – implicitly revives the tragic transition in somatic and emotional texture that precedes the hero's relocation into the epic Underworld: from *sklēros* to *malakos*.

Through the punning substitution of “boy” (*pais*) for Ajax (*Aias*), the second appearance of the hero in Matro's parade suggests that his tenderized piscine flesh mixes culinary and erotic pleasures, supplying guests and readers with the delicate taste not only of seafood, but also of the young man. New plates continually enliven Xenocles' banquet with *coups de théâtre*. One refashions the Iliadic naval contingent of Ajax (*Aias*) as a cohort of thirteen Salaminian ducks escorted by a “boy” (*pais*).⁹⁷ Matro's game of phonemic addition, subtraction, substitution and recombination magically turns *nēas* (“ships”) into *nēssas* (“ducks”), *Aias* into *pais*, emulating the alchemy of cooking, its inventive rebalancing of flavours and textures. Elsewhere in the *Attic Dinner Party*, the addition of a sigma – a notoriously “hard-sounding” (*sklērostomon*) consonant – triggers a textural alteration, changing the Homeric *argoi* (“agile”, but also “white”) into *sargoi* (“sargues”), an emblematically “hard-fleshed” fish.⁹⁸ Conversely, the cryptographic reduction of *Aias* to *pais* figures the tenderization of the heroic tuna, bringing out its erotic flavour.⁹⁹ The first *pais* is followed ten lines later by another, qualified as *ōraios* (“beautiful”, l.106) – an indication of sexual appeal that intimates the carnal interest of these “tender-fleshed” boys.¹⁰⁰ Exploring artful harmonies of sound and flavour, Matro discovers in Ajax's name a natural predisposition to a radical change of texture and identity, finding validation for his paradoxical reduction of a steely body to fish flesh with a boyish tang.

Similarly to the Ajax-like tuna, another hard-fleshed, Iliadic fish sacrifices its original phallic identity to softening. Matro's narrator details his enthusiastic reaction to a sturgeon, the “commander-in-chief” of a group of other fish:

τῶν δ' ἄρ' ἔλωψ κρείων δουρικλυτὸς ἡγεμόνευεν
οὔ πλῆρης περ ἔὼν κρατερῶς παλάμη ἐπορέχθην
γεύσασθ' ἱμείρων· τὸ δέ γ' ἀμβροσίη μοι ἔδοξεν

Their leader was lord sturgeon, spear-famed, to which, even if I was full, I forcefully reached out with my hand, desiring to taste it; this seemed to me ambrosia.¹⁰¹

The language of desire (*himeirōn*) alerts the reader that the experience reproduced here goes beyond the culinary. The reference to ambrosia invests this union of human lips and fishy flesh with the sensuality of a kiss. According to Meleager, the kiss (*philēma*) of an *erōmenos* (“lover”) imprints the taste of heavenly nectar on his lover’s lips.¹⁰² Tenderization has generated highly ironical effects, converting the tough flesh of a bellicose, “spear” fish into the softness of a boy.¹⁰³ The juxtaposition of *douriklutos* (“famed for the spear”) with the forceful tactile movement (*eporechthēn*, “I reached out”) that ushers in the kiss underscores the inversion.¹⁰⁴ In the Iliadic duel between Diomedes and Aphrodite, the warrior projects himself towards the goddess (*eporexamenos*), holding a “spear” (*doru*) that penetrates her delicate skin.¹⁰⁵ The sturgeon, whose status as *douriklutos* would more naturally align him with Diomedes, is the target of the same physical assault as Aphrodite in what can be regarded, at least from a Matronian perspective, as a sexually suggestive clash of human and divine bodies. Clearly, *douriklutos* expresses the sturgeon’s bygone taste – that of hard and sturdy flesh – in contrast with the current one – boyish freshness flavoured with quasi-divine sweetness.

This gastro-erotic contrast of flavours and textures illuminates the anger of the piscine Ajax, showing that Matro reimagines the hero’s defeat in the dispute over Achilles’ armour as a loss of sexual potency. The phrase “enraged about the weapons taken from him” completes the re-creation of Ajax in the epic Underworld by alluding to his resentful attitude against Odysseus, the designated heir of Achilles’ weapons.¹⁰⁶ But how does the metamorphosis of Ajax into tuna affect the meaning of this loss of “armour” (*teuchea*)? It has been proposed that “the reference is to the body of the fish ... from which the head is naturally indignant to have been severed”.¹⁰⁷ As we have seen, the tuna’s lost wholeness is an expression of its tenderization, which effects the fish’s transition from *Aias* to *pais*.¹⁰⁸ Consequently, like *douriklutos* applied to the sturgeon, *teuchea* – an obvious phallic metaphor – hints at the gastronomic castration of the piscine Ajax, his downgrading to a *hapalosarkos* creature supplying erotic pleasures through taste.¹⁰⁹

In a way, Ajax’s anger conveys the rebellion of epic against the gustatory aesthetics of the cento, which subjects Homer’s textual flesh to transformative procedures reminiscent not only of sophisticated gastronomy, but also of the physiology of taste. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin vividly pictured the chemistry of food ingestion:

As soon as the edible body has been put into the mouth, it is seized upon ... without possibility of retreat. Lips stop whatever might try to escape; the teeth bite and break it; saliva drenches it; the tongue mashes and churns it; a breath-like sucking pushes it toward the gullet; the tongue lifts up to make it slide and slip; ... it is pulled down into the stomach to be submitted to sundry baser transformations without ... a single atom or drop or particle having been missed by the powers of appreciation of the taste sense.¹¹⁰

The tenderizing mutilation that brings a harmless Ajax to Xenocles' table is a prelude to the ultimate alterations occurring in a ravenous maw. Textures ruptured into particles, heterogeneous atoms randomly coalesced and dispersed in multiple directions, residual materials fading into ephemeral or lasting sensations of pleasure (or disgust): the physiology of taste resembles Matro's disassembling of epic wholeness into phonemes, words and phrases, *mashed* and *churned*, *pushed* and *lifted* to stimulate a sensually attuned reader.¹¹¹ The replacement of the whole Ajax with a single body part – the tender head – previews this highly transformative process. In spite of lingering traces of the original bitter taste, the mollified and masticated tuna will caress its consumer's palate as much as the broken-down texture of Matro's para-epic.

Conclusion

Taste is, to an extent, always a question of texture.¹¹² We have seen how Matro's gustatory reading of three Homeric characters produces a wide spectrum of culinary and sexual flavours: doughy, creamy, funky and fishy. In spite of their different, even opposite, modulations, all the bodily flavours – Nausicaa, Thetis, Ajax – offer a similar kind of textural enjoyment, that is, softness. Matro's *Dinner Party* softens the sturdiest Homeric characters, while playfully tenderizing epic textuality in ways that make it digestible and sensually thrilling at the same time.

We notice a comparable play of softness and hardness in other culinary texts roughly coeval with Matro's. The dithyrambic *Dinner Party* of Philoxenus (PMG fr. 836) fetishizes soft textures and not just of edibles. White-skinned barley-cakes, delicate chickpeas, tender molluscan tentacles, pale ribs, sweet shoulder meat and even a

smooth-faced table: all these tenderized hard surfaces evince the effects of a gustatory softness suffused with an erotic charge.¹¹³ The textural imagery aligns with the effect of the so-called New Dithyramb, which was thought to soften the lyric form and, arguably, its audience through effete sound, musical and vocal.¹¹⁴ Yet the erotics of these texts, while softening the reader – loosening the limbs – at the same time do the opposite. The pornographic cookbook cited in the comic poet Plato’s *Phaon* recommends softening bitter onions – taming them with hot ash and drenching them in sauce (not unlike Matro’s Ajax) – before eating as many as possible in order to achieve a programmatic hardness.¹¹⁵ Conversely, the aggressive reader of Matro, while relishing risqué and empowering amusements, is subject to a kind of softening. Matro’s tactile and gustatory feast, in fact, puts its audience in thrall to their senses, invested in touching and tasting everything. It is this emotional investment that brings the soft textures of Matro’s parody to full sensual life.

1 Wilson (2007: 67–70) questions the soundness of ἀναγεῦσ(αι), but Henderson (1998) accepts it in the Loeb edition. On the Aristophanic passage, see Hitch’s discussion in [Chapter 1](#). On the link between textuality and taste in Roman culture, see Gowers ([Chapter 5](#) and 1993) and Rimell (2002: 166–8); in modern literature, Hertel (2005) and Delville (2008).

2 Aristophanes, fr. 128 KA = Kassel & Austin (1983–95).

3 Aristophanes, fr. 158 KA.

4 Hertel (2005) considers the sensual implications of the edible book metaphor, showing how taste can become the driving aesthetic force of novelistic writing and readerly responses to it. According to Rimell (2002: 11), Petronius’ *Satyrica* suggests that “reading cannot *not* be physical” because it is informed by “the sens[e] of taste”.

5 For an overview, see Wilkins (2000: 341–68).

6 Plato Com., fr. 189 KA. See Rosen (1995: 134–6); Degani (1998); Telò (2013b: 127–9).

7 PMG fr. 836 = Page (1962). See most recently LeVen (2014: 245–64).

8 See Olson & Sens (2000: xxiv–xlvi).

9 Arcestratus’ didactic para-epic is less parodic than Matro’s. On audience and modes of reception, see Olson & Sens (1999: 29–33; 2000: xliii–xlvi). For gastronomic parody of Homer in Cratinus, Aristophanes’ predecessor, see Telò (2014).

10 I use the terms “reading” and “reader”, but I am not here concerned with performance vs. reading. In the fourth century BCE, Homer was performed *and* read. The effects I describe will be applicable in either context.

11 According to Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 8.347e, Aeschylus self-deprecatingly described his plays as “slices from Homer’s big dinner-party”.

12 For a discussion of Homer’s own treatment of taste, consumption and their accompanying metaphors, see Hitch, [Chapter 1](#).

13 Freud ([1905] 1990: 111) famously discusses the overlap between nourishment and sexual satisfaction. On the interchange of culinary and erotic appetites in

- Greek culture, see Foucault ([1984] 1985: 50–7) and Davidson (1997). Rimell (2002: 99) highlights the “slippage between ... eating, reading and sexual intercourse” in Petronius’ *Satyricon*. See Rudolph’s introduction and Warren’s discussion of Persephone in [Chapter 6](#).
- 14 On the idea of the “edible woman” in Greek culture, see Henry (1992); Parker (1992); McClure (2003).
- 15 Here I borrow language from Barthes (1972: 78) and McBride (2010: 38).
- 16 Aristotle, *On the Soul* 422a; on this passage and the relation between taste and touch, see Rudolph’s discussion in [Chapter 2](#). In [Chapter 3](#), Totelin explores the inter-sensory relation between taste and touch in ancient medical contexts; see also Boulay’s discussion of multisensory wine analysis in [Chapter 11](#).
- 17 Fr. 1.118–20 Olson & Sens.
- 18 Homer, *Iliad* 2.489–90.
- 19 On the Homeric archetype of the “many mouths” topos, see Ford (1992: 72–9). Matro’s is the first of its many remakes (the rest are in Latin): see Courcelle (1955); Hinds (1998: 35–46); Gowers (2005). In “co-opting ... [the] epic motif to the alimentary aesthetic of satire” (Hinds 1998: 41), Persius (5.1–2) repropounds Matronian thematics of ingestion. On the tongue’s tactile quality, see Rudolph’s discussion in the introduction to this volume.
- 20 This suggestion is confirmed by the contextual proximity of γεύω with the tactile verbs ἐπορέγω and ἄπτομαι and the adjective ἄθικτος (“untouched”) in fr. 1. 70–1, 85–8 Olson & Sens. As Kelli Rudolph pointed out to me, Matro’s haptic rendition of the Homeric topos may be influenced by *Odyssey* 12.77–8: “a mortal man could not climb or mount up there, not even if he had twenty hands and feet”.
- 21 Barchiesi *apud* Hinds (1998: 46 n.53) observes that the cliché divides and fragments; Gowers (2005: 177) views it as a symbolic proliferation of poetic voices and influences. On the self-reflexive play with textual dismemberment in Latin centos, see Hardie (2007) and Malamud (2012).
- 22 For γεῦω (γεύω) as equivalent to ἄπτομαι, see Scholia D to *Iliad* 20.258. On the Indo-European root **geus-*, common to Greek γεύω, Latin *gustus*, English *choose*, see Watkins (1992, s.v.). On taste as a fragmented experience, see Clintberg (2012: 211–12), referring to Merleau-Ponty ([1945] 2012: 54). The metaphorical development of “taste” in modern languages as aesthetic judgement presupposes the notions of selection and discrimination: see Korsmeyer (1999) and Gowers ([Chapter 5](#)).
- 23 Fr. 1.1–6 Olson & Sens.
- 24 Homer, *Odyssey* 1.1.
- 25 See Pucci (1982, 1987: 127–8, 149–50); Bergren (1983); Peradotto (1990: 94–119); Goldhill (1991: 3–4).
- 26 Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 2.62c refers to one of Matro’s parodic works with the phrase ἐν τῷ δειπνῷ. He probably wrote several δειπνα. Timichidas of Rhodes composed poems with the same title.
- 27 On the phallic symbolism and the aphrodisiacal power of the octopus, see Watkins (1978: 231–5); Henderson (1991: 129–30); Shaw (2013: 14–15). For the octopus’ link with *polutropos* Odysseus, see esp. Detienne & Vernant ([1979] 1978: 37–41).
- 28 *Odyssey* 6.164: ἦλθον γὰρ καὶ κεῖσε, πολλὺς δέ μοι ἔσπετο λαός.
- 29 *Odyssey* 6.130–4. On Odysseus’ *gastēr* in the lion simile that introduces his encounter with Nausicaa, see Pucci (1987: 157–87) and Bakker (2006: 23–4, 2010a). For the simile’s sexual overtones, see Glenn (1998). In fr. 3.5–6 Olson & Sens, Matro employs the same pastiche of Homeric lines found in the prologue (*Iliad* 10.437 and 20.223), introducing the term γαστήρ in the second

one: λευκοτέρας χιόνος, ἰδέεν ἀμύλοισιν ὁμοίας/ τᾶων φυομένων
ἡράσσοτο πότνια γαστήρ. An explicit connection is thus posited between the
γαστήρ and the erotic feelings expressed by ἡράσσοτο.

30 *Iliad* 10.436.

31 *Iliad* 20.223.

32 Cf. Alcman, *PMG* fr. 1.45–59 and Anacreon, *PMG* fr. 417, on which see
Rosenmeyer (2004: 168–72), who observes that Nausicaa “is fortunate ... that
she meets an Odysseus rather than a Boreas”.

33 *Iliad* 10.437.

34 See Hunter (1999) on Theocritus 11.19–21.

35 *Odyssey* 6.101, 186. See the reference to the *leukōlenos* eel in fr. 1. 38–9 Olson &
Sens.

36 Field (2011: 7): “Brea[d] celebrate[s] birth and rebirth ... as well as the
sensuality inherent in the stalks of wheat ... planted and plowed in the warmth
of mother earth.”

37 Fr. 5.18 Olson & Sens: [*scil.* ἄρτος] λευκὸς ἀβραῖς θάλλων ὥραις τέρψει παρὰ
δεῖπνον. Bread is assimilated to a white-skinned body in Antiphanes, fr. 174.3
KA.

38 See Kurke (1992: 99) on the phrase ἀβρὰ παρθένος; cf. Choricus, *Declamations*
6.14 “a maiden blooming (θάλλουσαν) with the grace of her age”.

39 See Wohl (1993: 28) and Buchan (2004: 194–205) on the transition from maiden
to wife; Harder (1988) on the simile’s quelling of sexual tension; Gross (1976)
and van Nortwick (1979) for Penelope-like Nausicaa.

40 The quotation is from Olson & Sens (1999: 78).

41 Anaxandrides, fr. 42.38 KA: “tender-skinned visions of barley-cakes, breads,
cheese cakes” (τερενοχρώτες μαζῶν ὄψεις, ἄρτων, ἀμύλων).

42 Cf. Cratinus’ description of breast-touching in fr. 335.1 KA.

43 Plato *Com.*, fr. 188.8 KA.

44 Rushdie (2002: 111). Descriptions of the bosom in Greek poetry praise milky,
even snowy whiteness: see Gerber (1978: 203–4).

45 See Freud ([1905] 1990: 111).

46 *Odyssey* 6.131–2: οἱ ὅσσε δαίεται; 134: μήλων περιήσοντα; 136: μίξεσθαι. See
Glenn (1998: 112) on the erotics of the lion’s eyes; on the sexual meaning of
μίξεσθαι, see Lonsdale (1990: 35); Garvie (1994: ad loc.); Shapiro (1995: 160).

47 While ἶδον in Matro’s line 4 is, strictly speaking, drawn from *Iliad* 10.436
(describing Dolon’s sight of Rhesus’ horses), its proximity with ἦλθον γὰρ
κάκεισε, πολλὺς δέ μοι ἔσπετο λυμός (modeled on *Odyssey* 6.164, ἦλθον γὰρ
καὶ κείσε, πολλὺς δέ μοι ἔσπετο λαός) reconstitutes the contextual association
of ἦλθον and ἶδον in *Odyssey* 6.160: “I have never seen with my eyes a mortal
creature like you” (οὐ γὰρ πω τοιοῦτον ἶδον βροτὸν ὀφθαλμοῖσιν).

48 Cf. fr. 1.28 Olson & Sens: “I was among the first to put a strong-clawed grasp on
it” (τῇ δ’ ἐγὼ ἐν πρώτοις ἐπέχον κρατερώνυχα χεῖρα), where the epic epithet
κρατερώνυχα links the narrator’s tactile greed with the “Homeric use of
ὄνυχες to refer to the ... claws of carnivorous beasts such as lions” (Olson &
Sens 1999: 94). The target of this leonine clutch is a red mullet with alluring
female features. Cf. also fr. 1.100 Olson & Sens, where the parasite Chaerephon,
holding a leg of lamb, evokes the lion that tropes Polyphemus’ meal in *Odyssey*
9.292.

49 See Mulvey ([1989] 2009); cf. Bruno (2002: 294–5) (on the idea of the “eye-
mouth”). That Matronian delicacies, like any other represented virtuals, “are
objects of desire in the Lacanian sense – objects onto which we pin our longing
... only to find that longing perpetually frustrated” (Squire 2009: 426) does not
detract from their power of sensual and erotic engagement.

- 50Fr. 1.102–3 Olson & Sens.
- 51Olson & Sens (1999: 133).
- 52*Iliad* 8.195.
- 53The playful element does not exculpate the discourse of domination: see Richlin (1992) on Ovidian rapes. On metapoetic porridge in Roman literature, see Gowers (1993: 54–6).
- 54This course may represent the ending of the poem; it is, at least, the ending of the fragment. As in a modern context, the arrival of a showy cake has an inherently climactic force. On the various functions of taste – including nourishment and sensuality – see Rudolph’s introduction to this volume.
- 55Fr. 1. 116–18 Olson & Sens.
- 56On taste in the Persephone episodes, see Warren ([Chapter 6](#)).
- 57*Iliad* 2.488: οὐκ ἂν ἐγὼ μυθήσομαι οὐδ’ ὀνομήνω.
- 58Besides symbolizing fertility, Persephone occasionally takes on a specifically maternal role: see Edmonds (2004: 89–90).
- 59On the authorial name as a marker of a textual brand, see Foucault ([1969] 1979). For an analysis of ancient taste from the perspective of nutrition, see Baker ([Chapter 8](#)) and Gowers ([Chapter 5](#)).
- 60According to Segal (1994a: 19), Odysseus’ arrival on Scheria “constitutes a restoration to life after the quasi death on Ogygia”. On Calypso’s “raw” female sexuality, see e.g. Wohl (1993: 24–7); on her meals, see Hitch ([Chapter 1](#)).
- 61Kunz & Kaminsky (2001: 14).
- 62Kunz & Kaminsky (2001: 14).
- 63I pass over two other Homeric females: Penelope, an anchovy (line 23), and Iris, a squid (line 50). Although Matro’s treatment of them is less extensive than his engagement with Thetis, they fit into the overall scheme of the work, at minimum, as epic females reduced to delicacies. It may be significant that Iris is the sister of the Harpies, the food-snatchers par excellence. The text for the anchovy, which conjures Penelope’s appearances before the suitors (cf. *Odyssey* 1.334 = 16.416 = 18.210 = 21.65), clearly plays on the pervasive suspicion regarding her fidelity, as the anchovy is referred to as the “hetaira of Triton”. Anchovies are commonly associated with prostitutes: see Antiphanes fr. 27.23 KA and Nesselrath (1997: 279–81).
- 64Fr. 1.33–5 Olson & Sens.
- 65*Homeric Hymn to Apollo* 319–20: ἀλλὰ ἐ Νηρῆος θυγάτηρ Θέτις ἀργυρόπεζα / δέξατο.
- 66See *Odyssey* 10.136 (= 11.8 = 12.150) on Circe and *Odyssey* 12.449 on Calypso. On protective Thetis, see Hopman (2012: 162).
- 67See Degani (1995: 425) and Olson & Sens (1999: 96–7); on the cuttlefish as a seafood dish, see Olson & Sens (2000) on Arcestratus fr. 56.
- 68See Olson & Sens (1999: 96).
- 69Detienne & Vernant ([1979] 1978: 133–74, especially 157–62); cf. Aston (2009: 104–6).
- 70On the cult of Thetis in Thessaly, see Aston (2009).
- 71On Peleus’ abduction of Thetis, see Herodotus, *Histories* 7.191 (ἀρπασθείη) and Scholia to Lycophron 175b (κατέσχευ).
- 72Oppian, *Fishing (Halieutica)* 2.122; Aristotle, *History of Animals (Historia animalium)* 523b29–32.
- 73See Sissa (1987: 76–93) on the equivalence between the two orifices in Greek thought. Hopman (2012: 113–41) applies the folkloric motif of the *vagina dentata* to Scylla in the *Odyssey*; on this motif, in its psychoanalytic implications, see Otero (1996) and Miller (2012).
- 74Euripides, *Andromache* 1265–6: ἐλθὼν παλαιᾶς χοιράδος κοῦλον μυχὼν /

Σηπιάδος ἱζου. The scholia on this passage suggest a reference to the cave where Thetis originally mated with Peleus.

75On the sexual meaning of μυχός, see Henderson (1991: 141).

76On the opposition between the maternal, protective bosom of Thetis and the devouring jaws of Scylla see Hopman (2012: 162–3). Thetis’ adoption of contradictory roles is in keeping with her *mētis*; on her power, see Slatkin ([1991] 2011). Calypso’s cave (σπέος) alludes to her devouring sexuality; on the genital meaning of *specus*, see Adams (1982: 85).

77On seashells, oysters and sea urchins as metaphors for female sexual organs, see Henderson (1991: 142) and Shaw (2013: 5–10). A cuttlefish figures in Antiphanes’ catalogue of fish-shaped *hetairae* (fr. 27.4 KA): see Henry (1992: 256); Nesselrath (1997: 279–81); McClure (2003: 73). In contemporary popular culture, the octopus, closely related to the cuttlefish, is used to represent the lower bodies of castrating females: see Octopussy in the eponymous James Bond movie and Ursula in Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*.

78In Martial 3.77.7–10 and Ausonius, *Epigrams* 82.1–6, the taste of female genitalia is compared to tuna and anchovies respectively; an olfactory connection with shellfish may also be hinted at in Martial 9.40 and 9.62: see Butrica (2005: 267–9). For the ancient social stigma, see Parker (1997: 51–3); but cf. Aristophanes, *Peace* 715–17 for the exuberance that surrounds the prospect of cunnilingus: see Henderson (1991: 52, 186). On oyster-eating allusions to cunnilingus in Epicharmus, see Shaw (2013: 8–10).

79In the *Hymn to Apollo*, as noted by Richardson (2010: 128), Hera’s recollection of her rejection of Hephaestus is part of a “powerful speech of injured pride”.

80I borrow this phrase from Bora (1997: 95), discussing erotic textures in Henry James.

81http://candicescusina.blogspot.com/2012_10_01_archive.html (accessed 8 October 2016).

82*Odyssey* 11.543: Αἴαντος ψυχῇ.

83On the meaning of θαλαμηγιάδαι, an epithet derived from θαλάμη (“lair of a sea creature”), see Olson & Sens (1999: 107). The replacement of ψυχῇ with κεφαλῇ is suggested by the Odyssean intertext itself: cf. *Odyssey* 11.549, where τοῖον ... κεφαλῇν synecdochically refers to Ajax.

84Fr. 1. 53–5 Olson & Sens.

85See Aelian, *On the Nature of Animals* (*De natura animalium*) 15.5; Philostratus, *Images* (*Imagines*) 1.13.6; Oppian, *Fishing* 3.643–6. The comparison of tunas to soldiers dates back to the fifth century: see Aeschylus, *Persians* 424–8 and Aristophanes, *Wasps* 1085–7.

86Cf. Aeschylus fr. 307 R., where an anonymous character is likened to a lump of metal imperturbably enduring hammer-blows like a “voiceless tuna”.

87See Aristotle, *History of Animals* 602a25–31 and Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 7.302c; on οἷστρος (“gadfly”) and derivatives as staples of the tragic lexicon of madness, see e.g. Sophocles, *Women of Trachis* 1254; Euripides, *Heracles* 862; *Bacchae* 119.

88See Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 8.355c–e on various species. On the sensory opposition of σκληρός and ἀπαλός, see Boulay (Chapter 11). See Totelin, Chapter 3, on cultivation and its softening effects on plants.

89See Archestratus, fr. 37.3–9 Olson & Sens. Galen offers similar advice for cooking hard-fleshed fish: see Grant (2000: 182). For the praise of “soft” fish, see e.g. Pherecrates, fr. 137.10 KA and Diphilus, fr. 14.2–3 KA.

90Davidson (1972: 127).

91Paulus of Aegina 1.91 Heiberg. Paulus depends on Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* (*De alimentorum facultatibus*) 6.727–8, who includes the discussion of

μεγάλοι θύννοι in a section on hard-fleshed fish.

92The tuna's head and belly are considered best because more tender: cf.

Aristophanes, fr. 380.2–3 KA; Strattis, fr. 5.1, 32 KA; Callias Com., fr. 6.1 KA.

93On the absence of fish in Homer, see Davidson (1997: 11–20); on the culinary habits described in Homer's epic, see Hitch ([Chapter 1](#)).

94On Ajax as an ensnared animal, see Worman (2001: 235–6). In Sophocles, *Ajax* 350–3, Ajax is said to have been encircled by a bloody wave, an image that can be linked to the gory slaughter of tuna, on which see Mastromarco (1998). On the spectacle of Ajax's body, see Segal (1995a: 24–5); for visual representation of the hero's corpse, see the Attic red-figure cup attributed to the Brygos painter (J. Paul Getty Museum 86.AE.286).

95Worman (2001: 240).

96Worman (2012: 361) notes that Ajax's suicide “displays his defiance ... of ... conventional gender roles, given that in tragedy suicide is most typically the feminine solution”. On the softening effects of tragedy, famously criticized by Plato, see Zeitlin (1996: 367–74) and Bassi (1998: 210–12).

97Fr. 1.95 Olson & Sens: παῖς δέ τις ἐκ Σαλαμῖνος ἄγεν τρισκαίδεκα νήσσας. Cf. *Iliad* 2.557: Αἶας δ' ἐκ Σαλαμῖνος ἄγεν δυοκαίδεκα νῆας.

98On sigma as σκληρόστομον, see Aristoxenus, fr. 87 Wehrli; on sigmatism in antiquity, see Porter (2007). On the “hard-fleshed” sargue, see Arcestratus, fr. 37 Olson & Sens. A white complexion is often accompanied by soft flesh: see Galen, *On the Composition of Medicines According to the Places of the Body* (*De compositione medicamentorum secundum locos*) 12.507.

99On phonemic cryptography produced by an intertext, see Shoptaw (2000), who defines a cryptograph as “verbal material recoverable from but not (wholly) present in the poetic text and *marker* for the word(s) echoing or tracing this material on the page”.

100ὠραῖος and ἀπαλός – adjectives designating soft-fleshed fish – are characteristic of pederotic discourse: see Robson (2013: 53–9).

101Fr. 1.69–71 Olson & Sens.

102Meleager in *Palatine Anthology* 12.68.10: εἰ δ' ἔθελέησιν, / ἧ τάχα που κήγῳ γεύσομαι ἀμβροσίας. Cf. Catullus 99.2, discussed by Gowers ([Chapter 5](#)); on kisses as food, see Khan (1967: 612–14). On the taste of ambrosia, see Hitch ([Chapter 1](#)) and Warren ([Chapter 6](#)); on lips as an instrument of erotic taste, see Rudolph's introduction to this volume.

103The sturgeon's “elongated, pointed snout” (Olson & Sens 1999: 113) works as a spear, with an obvious phallic resemblance. On the phallic meaning of δόρυ, see Henderson (1991: 120).

104On the tactile choreography of pederotic kissing, see Lear & Cantarella (2008: 59–62).

105*Iliad* 5.334–8. This is the only epic passage in which ἐπορέγω appears without tmesis.

106Cf. *Odyssey* 11.554–5: χόλου εἵνεκα τευχέων / οὐλομένων.

107Olson & Sens (1999: 107).

108A comparable pun is the replacement, in fr. 1.78 Olson & Sens, of the epic ἡγήτορες (“leaders”) with ἡβήτορες (“young men”) to describe plump thrushes.

109For the sexual meaning of ὄπλα, the common Attic equivalent of τεύχεα, see Henderson (1991: 123).

110Brillat-Savarin ([1825] 1994: 44).

111Barthes (1989: 250–1) observes that Brillat-Savarin's “submission of the gustative sensation to time”, which emerges from the quick sequencing of the cited passage, assimilates taste to language or narrative. As noted by Brinkema

(2014: 169–70), Brillat-Savarin’s physiology of taste highlights a dialectic of destruction and preservation, which is, of course, central to the aesthetics of the cento. An explicit opposition of “wholeness” and fragmentation may be at work in fr. 1. 87–8 Olson & Sens, if one accepts the emendation of μόνος to ὅλος suggested by Condello (2001): κόσσυφος ἦλθεν ὅλος γεύσασθαι ἐτοῖμος / οὐ μὴν οὐδ’ ἄρ’ ἄθικτος ἔην, πόθειον δὲ καὶ ἄλλοι (“a black bird came, whole, ready to be tasted, but he wasn’t untouched, and others desired it too”). The juxtaposition of ὅλος with οὐδ’ ἄρ’ ἄθικτος conjures the loss of culinary and sexual – as well as textual – integrity. On the theory of atomic language in antiquity, see Porter (2010: 216–17, 225–6); for Saussure’s notion of edible letters, see Katz (2013: 180–1).

- 112 See, for example, the opinions of various American chefs collected in Dornenburg and Page (1996: 31, 83–4, 236). For an analysis of ancient wines in terms of texture, see Boulay ([Chapter 11](#)).
- 113 The serving-boy is presented as ἀπαλός (*PMG* fr. 836a. 2): see LeVen (2014: 174–5, 252).
- 114 On the softening effects of the New Dithyramb, see Dobrov & Urios-Aparisi (1995); Martin (2003); Csapo (2004).
- 115 Plato *Com.*, fr. 189.9–10 KA.

Tasting the Roman world

Emily Gowers

The memory then is, as it were, the belly of the mind, and joy and sadness like sweet and bitter food; which, when committed to the memory, are as it were passed into the belly, where they may be stowed, but cannot be tasted. It is ridiculous to imagine these to be alike; and yet they are not utterly unlike.

(Augustine, *Confessions* 10.14.21)

In this nervous analogy between memory and digestion, Augustine voices a paradox that lies at the heart of all ancient thinking about taste.¹ Taste and smell, associated as they are with physical appetite, with the mundane processes of fuelling and evacuating the body and with a shorter distance between the object of desire and its perception, tended to occupy a lower rank in the hierarchy of the senses than sight and hearing (with touch coming in at halfway place). In so consistently elevating the operations of the mind over those of the body, the Western philosophical tradition has largely confirmed these ancient prejudices.² Yet many languages since the Middle Ages, English among them, have given to “taste”, the sense that governs the selective or personal aspects of the essential act of eating, a metaphorical extension, one that expresses the other ways in which an individual makes choices in the world, discriminates among its various offerings and marks out his or her difference from others.³ Kant’s response in his *Anthropology* (1798) is typically baffled: “How might it have happened that modern languages in particular have designated the aesthetic faculty of judging with an expression (*gustus*, *sapor*) that merely refers to a certain sense organ (the inside of the mouth), and to its discrimination as well as choice of enjoyable things?”⁴ Of course, there have been dissenters, like physiologist of taste Brillat-Savarin, who have not seen any such discrepancy between sensory and aesthetic levels of taste. Nonetheless, those who positively celebrate the pleasures of the mouth as a superior form of human refinement have until the twentieth century been in a minority among Western thinkers.⁵

What makes taste different from the other senses? It cannot simply be the idea of superficial testing or of *je ne sais quoi* (as with Quintilian's definition of urbanity: *gustus urbis* "the taste of the city"⁶) – though we often use the concept in this connection. For every "soupçon", there is also a "glimpse", a "whiff", a "strain" and a "feel". Does the difference lie elsewhere, as Augustine hints? In the fact that what we take in via this sense is not always confined to the surface tissue between interior and exterior, as with the other senses, but, in cases of deeper ingestion, has consequences that involve the permanent incorporation of foreign material into the body?⁷ Taste should thus be by nature more exploratory, more dangerous, more personal and less reversible – though in these ways it bumps against smell, and touch too, to some extent.⁸ In recent years, philosophers and literary and cultural critics have been newly excited by the senses as a means of mediating and interpreting human experience. Anthropologist Paul Stoller has pioneered an alternative approach to the specificity of cultures through taste in particular, that most elusive point of contact with others and marker of their difference from their "Others".⁹ The very features that make taste distinctive – ideas of sampling, sifting and incorporating – also make it a promising medium for investigating the ancient Romans' intense and often suspicious relationship to their surroundings. Suspicions about taste in turn feed our relationship to them: how can we begin to understand a people for whom dripping sows' udders, fermented fish and fattened rodents were objects of prestige?

I leave to others in this volume (Baker, Banducci, Livarda and Totelin) the difficult task of trying to recover the specifics of Roman gustatory experience. Instead, this chapter concentrates on the role of taste as a metaphor in Roman literary texts: how choice, desire, love, revulsion, unfamiliarity, trust, memory and loss have been captured and expressed as momentary or lingering sensations on the lips, tongue or palate.¹⁰ In exploring these analogies with physical taste, we need to appreciate one thing above all: however visceral and immediate they may be,¹¹ intellectually they are rooted in ideas of paradox. Kant was right that the word *gustus* (and its European derivatives) began to be used of "taste" in the sense of a higher form of cultural discrimination only in the post-Roman period. The proverbial *de gustibus non est disputandum*, "there is no disputing about taste", for example, is probably medieval and not a formula an ancient Roman would have used. Yet the ambiguity between the physiological sense of taste and its metaphorical extensions to discernment in other

spheres is one we have inherited from the ancient world: the Romans were well aware of the similarities and differences involved in allowing the same words to double for physical and intellectual (or emotional) forms of discrimination.

From a Proto-Indo-European root that signified “perceive”, for example, came both Latin *sapor* “flavour” and *sapientia* “wisdom”.¹² The word for “palate”, *palatum*, was used of physiological and aesthetic perception alike. Yet for all the parallels, the science of taste was never fully endorsed among other forms of discrimination. Cicero famously says of one of his Republican culture heroes, Laelius, “He was not called ‘wise’ (*sapiens*) because he could not tell what was delicious (*suauiissimum*) – it does not follow that if someone’s mind has taste (*sapiat*) his palate (*palatum*) has no taste (*sapiat*) – but because he set such little store by it.”¹³ The implication is that Laelius was exemplary because he did not allow his physical appetite to take priority over his superior powers of mental discernment. Nonetheless, Laelius is credited with having some kind of “palate”, and herein lie the roots of unease. Long before Pierre Bourdieu, the Romans provided a fine example of a multi-layered, competitive, global society in which food choices, where they were possible, played an important part in the definition of social and ethnic groups.¹⁴ Taste was an expression of social aspiration, transformation, belonging and yearning, for childhood and home, as it is today. Brillat-Savarin had his forebears in the Greco-Roman world, as Athenaeus’ *Deipnosophists* indicates, and yet the figure of the gourmet, the man who lives for taste, is generally held at a distance in the sources that have come down to us. Factors include the continued political and moral cachet of austerity, the failure of earlier, more sybaritic empires and the prejudices of writers themselves against what was ephemeral, worldly and divisive.¹⁵

Thus the mantra of Horace’s fad-following gastronome, Catius, was never meant to be taken seriously: “Let no one dare to claim he’s mastered the art of dining until he’s first studied the subtle science of flavours” (*nec sibi cenarum quiuis temere arroget artem / non prius exacta tenui ratione saporum*).¹⁶ Indeed, gourmets whose palate was so sensitive that they could taste if a fish had been caught between two specific bridges in Rome were ripe material for satire;¹⁷ fine gastronomic discrimination was often unfairly assimilated to the whirlpool (*gurgis*) of gluttony or undermined by exposing the indiscriminate homogenization of dishes in the human stomach.¹⁸ Much was made of how sophisticated palates were dulled by jaded

living and dependent on artificial stimulants. A strong binary opposition operated between (major) staple and (minor) relish, with an imbalance between the two often regarded as symptomatic of larger forms of moral waywardness and social unrest.¹⁹ Longings for exotic spices – cinnamon, pepper, silphium – as recorded in the desires of Plautus’ characters (in his *Casina* and *Rudens*) coexisted with nostalgia for the authenticity of *terroir* (Pliny speaks of Alpine goose that loses its flavour once it has travelled to Rome).²⁰ Tacitus’ primitive Germans are commended for the un-Roman simplicity of their diet – wheat, meat, beer – which has no need of fuss or flavour-enhancers to make it palatable (*Germania* 23). A recurrent philosophical ideal is that hunger provides the best, most natural “relish” to the simplest meal. King Darius, for example, reduced to lapping up muddy water polluted with corpses, pronounced that he had never drunk anything more delicious (*iucundius*) – because he had never until then known true thirst.²¹

Surprisingly, as far as we can tell, the Latin gourmet’s vocabulary was not particularly refined. As with other Western civilizations till the nineteenth century, there seem to have been few discriminators beyond the four main flavours: sweet, sour, sharp and salty.²² However, though there is no word for it, the Romans had their fifth taste, *umami*, too. Indeed, they are famous for it, given their notorious liking for fermented fish sauce, ancient analogue of modern Far Eastern varieties, whose four basic grades, *garum*, *liquamen*, *muria* and *allec*, had a myriad subdivisions, up to the brand that cost 1,000 sesterces – more expensive than perfume, as Pliny marvelled.²³ But beyond gradually acclimatizing the young to less sweet flavours, there was little attempt to prescribe or standardize taste. Indeed, the atomist Lucretius set out to account for divergent perceptions, in individuals (when sick or well, for example) as well as between individuals. As modern science has shown, his version of the theory developed by Democritus of variously shaped particles and tiny receptors that, by a kind of “velcro” hooking effect, create different sensations on the tongue was particularly prescient.²⁴ A few examples survive of cross-sensory or synaesthetic vocabulary: *acer*, originally “pointed”, could indicate both “shrill” and “sharp-tasting” (compare *drimus* “pungent” in Greek²⁵); *surdus* “deaf” could equally be applied to colour that was “matt” or wine that tasted “flat”. Words also exist, as with colour, for subdued or heightened versions of basic flavours, such as *subacidus* “slightly acidic” or *peracerbus* “intensely bitter”.

The sample texts I have chosen here, from pastoral to satirical,

religious to historical, have one thing in common: they all generate meaning by juxtaposing physical and metaphorical forms of perception. A recurrent context for this juxtaposition is a poetic one, not surprisingly, given that concepts like sweetness, saltiness and sharpness traditionally inform literary-critical vocabulary.²⁶ Horace, for example, famously compares the slightest fault in a poem to an out-of-tune orchestra, coarse perfume or a jarring combination of poppy seed with Sardinian honey.²⁷ He chooses to suggest the problems of pleasing different readers with different literary tastes through the image of a dinner party where the host must cater for guests with incompatible preferences:

denique non omnes eadem mirantur amantque;
carmine tu gaudes, hic delectatur iambis,
ille Bioneis sermonibus et sale nigro.
tres mihi conuiuae prope dissentire uidentur,
poscentes uario multum diuersa palato.
quis dem? quid non dem? renuis quod tu, iubet alter;
quod petis, id sane est inuisum acidumque duobus.

In short, not everyone admires or likes the same things: one likes lyric, one adores iambics, while a third loves Cynic satire and coarse salty wit. They're almost like three dinner-guests with different tastes, who ask for various flavours to suit their diverse palates. What to serve, what not serve? One man rejects what another man requests; then what a third desires is thoroughly unappetizing and nasty for the other two.²⁸

The analogy is reinforced by the calculated use of words that already span physiology and aesthetics – *dissentire* “disagree about flavour/taste”, *palatum* “palate”, *sal* “salt/wit” and *acidus* “sharp/unpleasant” – in what amounts to a relatively uncomplicated conflation of the aesthete’s world and the gourmet’s. Yet Horace is aware of the perversity of taste in both spheres: he likens his least palatable poems, the iambic *Epodes*, to acidic or unpleasant food and the coarse wit of his *Satires* to unrefined salt.²⁹

By contrast, Petronius’ satirical narrative of Trimalchio’s dinner exploits the equivalence for more stomach-turning effect. A dizzying synaesthetic experience is filtered for us through the sensations, simultaneously physical and mental, of the snobbish narrator, who turns up his nose at the pretentious offerings served up by a self-made

ex-slave in order to affirm his own status as a person of superior refinement. The ersatz, de-natured food is repellent enough, but Encolpius' vocabulary of flavours condemns the host's entertainments as well as his dinner: a "painful" piece of singing is an *acidum canticum* ("acidic song", 31.6), boasting is "rotten" (*putidum*, 73.2). Even before entering the dining room, the guests are aesthetically sated – "fed up with admiring" (*admiratione iam saturi*, 28.6) and "gorged on pleasures" (*repleti his uoluptatibus*, 30.5) – such that it is hard to tell on what level, physical or metaphorical, to take the stated climax of the dinner: "things were reaching a state of utter nausea" (*ibat res ad summam nauseam*, 78.5).³⁰ Meanwhile, the bewildering array of dishes that compose the appetizer course, the *gustatio*, introduces a metaphor for uncomprehending sensory sampling that extends to our entire experience of the meal.³¹

The power of taste as a metaphor was not restricted to links between the physical senses and aesthetics. The Romans labelled their wider surroundings and life experiences with sensory vocabulary. Sweetness, the flavour of the child's first diet, was prized above all – as its metaphorical extension into the sphere of pleasure and happiness suggests: *dulcis*, *suavis* and *blandus* characterized objects of sexual desire, children and persuasive or seductive language.³² One word for "kiss" (of a sexual kind) was *s(u)auium*, a sweet taste on the lips. Yet sweetness could be the vehicle of deception or corruption, tipping into "bitter" regret: *acerbus*, *acidus*, *tristis* and *amarus* were applied metaphorically to stern expressions and unpleasant experiences. Tortured erotic experience transforms the taste of a kiss stolen from Catullus' beloved Iuuentius from pleasant sweetness (*suauiolum dulci dulcius ambrosia*, "a kiss sweeter than sweet ambrosia", 99.2) to grimace-making bitterness (*suauiolum tristi tristius elleboro*, "a kiss more bitter than bitter hellebore", 99.14). Indeed, the paradoxical bitter-sweetness of love is expressed particularly well in Latin through puns on *amarus* "bitter"/*amari* "be loved": for example, Plautus, *Cistellaria* 69–70, "For Love abounds in both honey and gall; it is sweet to taste, but piles up a sufficiency of bitterness" (*namque ecaster Amor et melle et felle est fecundissimus; / gustui dat dulce, amarum ad satietatem usque oggerit*).³³

Memory, too, could be described in terms of ambivalent taste. For Seneca, remembrance of lost friends is uncomplicatedly sweet, but for his friend Attalus it is more piquant, akin to foods with gastronomic complexity, "in the same way that some fruits have an agreeably acidic taste (*suauiter aspera*), or as in very old wines it is their

bitterness that pleases us (*amaritudo delectat*)”.³⁴ The progression from sweet to bitter, innocence to disillusionment, is not always straightforwardly chronological. By analogy with unripe vegetation, *acerbus* “sharp” was also used of premature death. Cicero’s *On Old Age* (*De senectute*), with its running emphasis on the rhythms and satisfactions of timely harvesting, is a manifesto for the joys of a ripe old age, from which the bitterness of youth is absent: “The grape that at first is highly acidic to taste (*peracerba gustatu*) grows sweet with maturity (*maturata dulcescit*) ... I support austerity in old age, but only if it is moderate – and sharpness (*acerbitatem*) never.”³⁵

Eating habits have always marked a crucial dividing line between humans and animals, and another context where the relationship between the empirical and the gustatory is explored is in narratives of human transformation into bestial form. These tales often focus on the bizarre aspects of retaining a refined human palate inside a coarse animal body, by incorporating flavour words that pit variations in diet against the metaphorical associations of taste with pleasant or unpleasant experience. One of the most famous transformations is that of Io, legendary foundress of Argos and rape victim of Jupiter, who temporarily becomes a cow but retains a strong distaste for animal fodder. When the neoteric poet Calvus consoles his unfortunate heroine, bitter cud becomes a straightforward token of bitter experience: “Unhappy maiden, you graze on bitter grass” (*a uirgo infelix, herbis pascere amaris*, fr. 9 Courtney). Ovid echoes this in his *Metamorphoses*: “she grazes on the foliage of trees and on bitter grass” (*frondibus arboreis et amara pascitur herba*, 1.162).

By contrast, Virgil’s first *Eclogue* embraces these divergent animal and human taste-worlds in a subtler double vision. For him, the opening word of Theocritus’ *Idylls*, Greek *hadu* “sweet”, has crystallized as a programmatic marker for pastoral poetry at the very point when that sweetness is on the point of evaporating.³⁶ Looking bitterly on the sweet fields (*dulcia arua*) he is about to lose, the shepherd Meliboeus accepts Tityrus’ last supper of mellow apples (*mitia poma*) and mild chestnuts (*castaneae molles*), while appreciating that his goats will go on blithely munching their bitter willow-herbs (*salices carpetis amaras*) under another master. This marks more than just the difference between human and animal tastes. From Meliboeus’ perspective, the bitter herbs, so pleasant to the goats, also characterize his own distance from the scene, the “sour grapes” mentality of a soon-to-be exile.³⁷ The discrepancy is inverted and becomes comic in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, where Lucius, narrator-turned-donkey, is

forced to eat rough husks and diarrhoea-producing vegetables, until the day when he is bought by cooks and amuses his new masters with his taste for the spiciest and most sophisticated human food: "Searching out everything that would be most distasteful to an ass and attempting to test the extent of my domestication, they served me meat seasoned with silphium, peppered poultry and fish in exotic sauces, while the dining-room rang with their raucous laughter."³⁸

The physiology of Roman taste, in so far as we understand it from Lucretius and elsewhere, throws up one important difference from modern concepts. In antiquity, the lips, interestingly, were as much organs of taste as the tongue, and acted as an exploratory zone and a barrier to further, perilous ingestion. In Fronto's intimate and somewhat nauseating description of a small boy working, or rather playing, for days with a grape as though it were a boiled sweet, all physical surfaces – lips, tongue and gums – are equally involved:

uuarum audissimus est; primum denique hunc cibum degluttivit,
nec cessavit per totos paene dies aut lingua lambere uuam aut
labris sauiari ac gingiuis lacessere aut ludificari.

He just adores grapes: in short, he has stuffed himself with them and hasn't stopped for days at a time either licking a grape with his tongue or caressing it on his lips or worrying at it or toying with it on his gums.³⁹

Such sensual indulgence was hardly proper, however, for civilized adults. If ladylike skimming was the appropriate mode for a Roman matron, gorging was the mark of a barbarian. The two are conveniently exemplified side by side at the banquet in Dido's palace in *Aeneid* 1, where the queen's (until this point) respectable femininity trumps her Punic ethnicity, but where a token barbarian figure must also be introduced to mark the difference between Roman and Carthaginian styles of consumption. While Dido barely grazes the festive loving cup with her lips (Servius comments: "It shows the queen's restraint and her Roman manners"), her henchman Bitias greedily drains the goblet to its depths:

dixit, et in mensam laticum libavit honorem,
primaque libato summo tenuis attigit ore,
tum Bitiae dedit increpitans; ille impiger hausit
spumantem pateram, et pleno se proluit auro
post alii proceres.

She spoke and poured an offering of wine onto the table and was the first to skim the cup with the surface of her lips, before giving it to Bitias, urging him as she did so; without ado, he drained the foaming bowl and drenched himself in pure gold; and after him, the other princes drank.⁴⁰

Yet a few lines later, Dido has fallen for Aeneas, and now, metaphorically, she starts to forget her manners: *longum ... bibebat amorem*, “she drank deep draughts of love” (*Aeneid* 1.749). It is hardly chance that this metaphor of deep drinking appears in the context of a feast, where Cupid, executing the plans of Juno and Venus, may even be thought to have slipped an actual dose of love poison (the original colouring of Latin *uenenum* “poison”, 1.688, from *Venus* “love”) into the queen’s wine. As Lyne puts it, “Dido drinks as she ‘drinks’”.⁴¹ But it is the *styles* of drinking that are at odds, and this is what calibrates the beginning of Dido’s sin.

If *sapor* and *sapientia* are conceptually related, then the Roman child’s first oral experiences will always have combined sensation and knowledge in the same mouthful. Lucretius, relying as he does heavily on empirical analogy, famously uses a gustatory image to explain how his “sweet” poetry works as a vehicle to inculcate hard-going, unpalatable philosophy – a metaphorical dose of medicine whose bitter taste is disguised by the “honey” smeared round the vessel’s rim.⁴² The image gains much of its power and its point from the fact that it is imagined as being administered to innocent *children*, who stand here for the ignorant recipients of Epicurean wisdom, “captivated, but not fooled” by the sweet taste. Lucretius’ honeyed cup is subsequently reincarnated in Horace’s satirical image of children learning the alphabet with the aid of letter-shaped biscuits, the “alphabet soup” of the ancient world (*Satires* 1.1.25–6).

If we put these two ancient notions together – the idea of *graded* levels of tasting and the equally common theme of disguising bitter tastes, medicinal or noxious, with sweeteners – we can understand how potent a metaphor taste could be for a human being’s experience of the world, and in particular a first encounter. According to a common Latin expression, aspects of the external environment were tentatively tasted “on the tip of the lips”,⁴³ before being fully ingested.⁴⁴ Perhaps because he was himself “tasting” of unfamiliar experience as a “new man” (one without a family history of senatorial office) or because he aspired to refinement, Cicero is particularly fond of the metaphor, whether speaking of his own first steps in politics or

introducing his reading public to unfamiliar or suspicious experiences or concepts – philosophy, rhetoric, even physiology (*physiologia* – one can almost feel the untranslated Greek rolling off his tongue) – or inducing revulsion at unnatural human tastes, for example, the citizen blood “sipped, or rather drained” (*gustaras ciuilem sanguinem uel potius exsorbueras*) by Antony.⁴⁵ Playing indulgent father-figure in his *Defence of Caelius*, Cicero tries to exonerate his young charge, the playboy Caelius, on the grounds that, even though he has not merely “sipped at” but fully immersed himself in the life of the senses, he may yet surface to become an honourable citizen:

I have seen and heard of many in this city, who have not just tasted this kind of life on the surface of their lips (*non modo qui primoribus labris gustassent genus hoc uitae*) or, as it were, on the tips of their fingers (*extremis, ut dicitur, digitis attigissent*) but have given over the whole of their adolescence to pleasure, and yet they manage to emerge and as it were bear fruit and become serious, successful men.⁴⁶

This notion of a *spectrum* of gustatory experience, from tentative to all-absorbing, allows taste to play a vital role as sensory metaphor in the literature of adolescence. A striking example is that classic memoir of youthful temptation and redemption, Augustine’s *Confessions*. Like many thinkers, ancient and modern, Augustine regards vision as the most prestigious of the senses, primarily because of its conceptual link to intelligence. In his discussion in Book 10 of the perilous allurements offered by each of the senses, he comes to sight last, observing,

We do not say, “Listen how that gleams”, or “Smell how bright that is”, or “Taste how that shines”, or “Touch how that gleams”. In all these contexts, we say “see”. And we say not only “See how that light shines”, something that only the eyes can perceive, but we also say, “See how that sounds, see how that smells, see how that tastes, see how hard that is.”⁴⁷

Yet although he recalls how all the senses in turn (except, for some reason, smell) assailed his unstable consciousness, it is taste that has a special capacity for measuring the gradations of sin, from first temptation to total immersion.

The most celebrated of all Augustine’s narratives to use taste as a metaphor for dangerous initiation and irrational primal sin is of course his guilty recollection of pear-stealing with a group of

adolescent hoodlums:

There was a pear tree close to our own vineyard, heavily laden with fruit, tempting neither for its colour nor for its flavour (*nec forma nec sapore inlecebrosis*). Late one night – after prolonging our games in the streets until then, as our bad habit was – a group of young hooligans, and I was among them, went to shake and rob this tree. We carried off a huge load of pears, not to eat ourselves, but to dump out to the pigs, though we did taste them (*etiamsi aliquid inde comedimus*). Doing this pleased us all the more because it was forbidden.⁴⁸

Several elements in this story clearly recall the Judaeo-Christian tradition of fall and redemption (in which both stages, Eve's temptation and the sacrament of bread and wine, involve eating).⁴⁹ The pear tree is a variation on the apple tree of Paradise, while the idea of fodder for pigs recalls the temporary abjection of the Prodigal Son. Yet the story turns on a more universal paradox. Augustine is emphatic that there was nothing intrinsically sweet about the taste of the pears that should have caused the temptation in the first place, only a perverse mental longing. It was peer pressure that drove the thieving urge, rather than any seductive qualities in the fruit itself; it was the camaraderie of sin that gave those bland pears their necessary tang (*condimentum ibi facinus erat*, 2.6.12) and guilt that gave them their bitter aftertaste.

This is just one of many episodes in which Augustine condemns two levels of misdirected appetite, physical and spiritual, alongside each other, picturing himself as abject, wallowing in slime, no better than the pigs to whom he and his friends threw the rejected pears – whether he is remembering fumbling adolescent initiation or the seething “cauldron of illicit loves” (*sartago flagitiosorum amorum*, 3.1.1) that surrounds him in Dido's Carthage, mixing “bile with sweetness”.⁵⁰ From the moment he recalls his teenage tears for Dido on reading the *Aeneid* (a pagan fiction that blotted out his awareness of God, 1.13.20), we are alerted to the potential of that poem as moral parable or parallel *Bildungsroman* for the young convert.⁵¹ As in Virgil, it is a matron, Augustine's virtuous mother Monica, who provides the ideal model for restrained consumption. When Monica takes the sacramental wine to church, she barely tastes it: “She did not serve more herself than one little cup of wine, diluted for her own temperate palate ... she gave those present only tiny sips. Her quest

was for devotion, not pleasure.”⁵² Later in the work, however, we learn that Monica has a dark secret, that she is a more Dido-like Punic matron than we had realized. Augustine relates how as a young girl, in an exploratory episode similar to the pear-stealing, she was instructed by her parents to draw wine from the family cask and felt tempted to wet the tips of her lips with a little sip (*primoribus labris sorbebat exiguum*). Again, he stresses, her desire derived less from physical appetite than from a youthful curiosity which seethed like new wine itself: “What led her to do this was not any appetite for drink but the exuberant spirits of youth, which can bubble over in playful impulses that adults usually try to suppress in children” (9.8.18). Thus Monica fell into deeper addiction, which was only cured when a concerned maidservant reported her and shamed her permanently into self-control.

By contrast, Augustine’s conversion and his reception of God are described as a nourishing process of incorporation. God enters Augustine’s soul as food enters the body; his grosser appetites are trained, restrained and sublimated into spiritual hunger. In between come the seductive teachings of the Manicheans, compared to a parade of illusory dream dishes (*in illis ferculis phantasmata splendida*, 3.6.10), with which Augustine for a while confused the love of God. In a graphic example of gustatory imagery, he tells God, “You did not taste in my mouth as you really are”: *nec sapiebas in ore meo sicuti es* (3.6.10). Through conversion, Augustine undergoes a spiritual change of palate. Once recalled, the old temptations taste bitter, by contrast with divine beneficence, which is genuinely sweet: “Recalling my wicked ways with the bitterness (*amaritudine*) of memory, so that you may bestow sweetness on me (*ut tu dulcescas mihi*), an authentic sweetness (*dulcedo*), a sweetness that is happy and serene.”⁵³

If taste represents initiation and conversion in a religious context, it can also express the transition to unfamiliar conditions in a historical one. Adolescence and dangerous tasting converge differently, but equally memorably, in an episode from Tacitus’ *Annals*, the one in which the new emperor Nero poisons his cousin Britannicus at dinner in full view of his relatives (13.15–16). Sight, again, might well seem to be the dominant sense in play in this set-piece narrative – given that the death is staged by Tacitus as a “show” parallel to an earlier royal spectacle (a Saturnalian game of forfeits at *Annals* 13.15) and evokes visible reactions in its mute viewers. Notwithstanding, a case can be made for taking taste as the crucial sense instead, indeed for reading taste as the underlying metaphor of this entire section of

Tacitus' Julio-Claudian narratives of murder and intrigue. It is not simply that two deaths are carried out by disguising poison in food or drink, the paradigmatic one being the delicious-seeming but poisonous mushroom (*delectabili boleto uenenum*, *Annals* 12.67) that killed Claudius, on which Nero's murder of Claudius' son Britannicus is patterned. More than that: the act of tasting becomes emblematic of the repeated testing of limits in the supremely "adolescent" or "ephebic" stage of Nero's reign and of the transition from innocence to experience, both for the emperor and for his victims and observers.⁵⁴

Since Claudius' time, the court taster had been a fixture at royal meals, an attendant singled out for his expertise in sampling food and drink (*cibos potusque eius delectus ex ministris gustu explorabat*) and a crucial mediator between the imperial family and the hazards of the outside world, one whose procedures Nero now cleverly circumvents. The taster is, as it were, the outer "lips" of the regime, the quasi-parental figure who keeps the royal progeny safe (just as a father in one of Seneca's declamations explains that he has never let his daughter out of his sight, even to the point of pre-tasting all her food).⁵⁵ In the case of the poisoned mushroom, the taster (*praegustator*, Suetonius, *Claudius* 44.2) was a eunuch, Halotus, "accustomed to serving feasts and testing them by tasting" (*inferre epulas et explorare gustu solitus*, Tacitus, *Annals* 12.66). Even this office turned out to be exploratory, an apprenticeship for greater things. Galba later promoted him to *procurator*, "carer" on a more than domestic scale – Galba, who himself as a child was chucked under the chin by the emperor Augustus and told: "One day you, too, son, will get a taste of my power."⁵⁶

In Tacitus' narrative, two adolescents, both of whom have been forced to grow up too soon, are thrust prematurely into the limelight: Nero, the new emperor (aged seventeen), and Britannicus, the righteous pretender (aged thirteen), whose insolence has already been tested by a party game in which he stood up and sang a Saturnalian protest. An earlier poison, administered by trusted tutors (*ab ipsis educatoribus*), has failed by being too weak and too slow, so Nero has a new potion devised and tested (*cognitis antea uenenis*) for efficacy and speed. An essential condition is that Britannicus is still *in statu pupillari*, confined to a lower table and too young for adult liquor. Herein lies the beauty of Nero's ruse: to dissolve the poison not in the drink itself but in the innocuous water used to reduce its fiery heat (*praecalida*) for tender palates.⁵⁷ Trusting the guardians who monitor his consumption, the child tests the pre-tasted drink (*libata gustu*

potio), its innocence (*innoxia adhuc*) mirroring his own, but he is deceived instead by the purer-seeming solvent.⁵⁸

As has often been remarked, Tacitus marks this murder as a watershed, an example of an institutional change that happens overnight and instantaneously becomes a “tradition”.⁵⁹ After a brief pause, the onlookers react in different ways: some flee immediately; others, with more sense, act oblivious. The party goes on but the world will never be the same. The dinner is indeed awash with many kinds of dangerous precedent, imposed by either impatient ambition or emergency measures. Not only has it become a custom (*mos habebatur*) for the young royals to eat in the sight of their older relatives at their own less opulent table (isolated from full conviviality⁶⁰), but the first murder of one of Nero’s relatives, as Agrippina realizes in a flash, sets an example for deaths to come, notably her own (*parricidii exemplum*, “a precedent for parricide”); meanwhile, Nero dismisses Britannicus’ freak paralysis as a consequence of his “usual epilepsy” (*comitalem morbum ... solitum*).

But the first of the new imperial institutions Nero must negotiate, one that cannot be bypassed (*ne omitteretur institutum*), is the ritual sampling of the young royals’ food by the court taster.⁶¹ His presence in the background here encourages us to read Nero’s charade as a test, not just of the effectiveness of the poison on its victim but also of the various witnesses’ ability to apprehend the changes in their surroundings and “swallow” the rapidly changing meaning of normality in Neronian Rome. Agrippina is caught between complicity and horrific realization; Britannicus’ sister Octavia successfully internalizes her emotions. The future emperor Titus, Suetonius tells us, tasted the same drink, was seriously afflicted and never forgot the incident.⁶² Nero’s tutor Seneca, too, may have witnessed the episode and learned enough from the experience to take his own precautions against poisoning later in Nero’s reign: “Some said that poison was prepared for him on Nero’s orders by one of his freedmen, Cleonicus by name, and that Seneca managed to avoid it, either because the freedman revealed the trick to him or because of his own paranoia, while he sustained life on a very simple diet of wild fruit and, if he was thirsty, running water.”⁶³

Tacitus’ subsequent allusion to Britannicus’ “bitter” or “unripe” death (*acerba funera*, *Annals* 13.17) reminds us that the Romans categorized the seasons of life according to juice and taste metaphors.⁶⁴ This was not a dynasty that progressed from rawness towards ripe maturity.⁶⁵ Instead, it was through sweet-talking

(*blandimenta*) that the smoothest royal operators, first Agrippina, then Nero, coaxed or fooled innocents into accepting rapid and unheard-of harshness.⁶⁶ With one notable exception: dissident-philosopher Thræsea Paetus repudiated – *respuat* (literally “spat out”) – Nero’s success (*Annals* 16.22). In short, the Britannicus episode encapsulates the entire arc of Nero’s reign, from innocuous beginnings to bitter and rebarbative ending.⁶⁷ For all this, the figure of the taster, reassuring barrier between royalty and external danger, between youth and too-harsh experience, has set the scene.

I have only been able to pay lip-service in this chapter to the range of Roman contexts where taste features as an accessible paradigm for contact between an individual and his or her environment, particularly contact that is unfamiliar and new. The Romans were not an isolated case in the ancient world. They inherited from the Greeks their apprehensions about the pleasures and dangers involved in testing and incorporating external substances – especially where young people were concerned and when tasting was so closely aligned with sexual rites of passage. These anxieties accompanied them when they themselves crossed the border from paganism to Christianity, when “initiation” became “conversion”. Forbidden fruit like Persephone’s pomegranate, Eve’s apple and Augustine’s pears belong to a long narrative tradition – Greco-Roman, Jewish and Christian – of “transformative eating”, discussed in greater detail in the [next chapter](#), where the consequences are often indelible.⁶⁸ We have seen some surprisingly sensual applications of taste in Christian writing, but always sublimated into metaphor for a believer’s intimate experience of God.⁶⁹ What Augustine shows, and what his mother Monica shows, as she turns from cupboard-thief into eucharistic ministrant, is how cautiously the adolescent’s progress from tentative sip to open-mouthed encounter continued to be monitored, how carefully the ecstasy of enjoyment was tempered by desiccated wafer and rationed drop of wine.

¹On the cultural rehabilitation of taste among the senses, see Stoller (1989); Classen (1997); Korsmeyer (1999); Howes (2003, 2005); Korsmeyer (2005); Howes & Classen (2014). On taste metaphors in ancient Greece, see Gosling & Taylor (1982); Davidson (1995, 1997); in ancient Rome, Gowers (1993); Rimell (2002); in the Renaissance, Jeanneret (1991); in the eighteenth century, Gigante (2005). On synaesthesia and the ancient senses, see Butler & Purves (2013), esp. Clements (2013) and Telò (2013a).

²Korsmeyer (1999: 11–37); see also Stoller (1989: 23–34). On ancient philosophical approaches to taste see Rudolph ([Chapter 2](#)).

³Kilgour (1990: 9–10).

- 4Kant ([1798] 2006: 139).
- 5Stoller (1989: 23–4) sees deconstruction as a key movement and Jacques Derrida as a key figure in the philosophical rehabilitation of sensory perception.
- 6Quintilian 6.3.17.
- 7Korsmeyer (1999: 2–3).
- 8Aristotle, *On the Soul* 434b18–19: “Taste is a kind of touch.” In the Middle Ages, the English *taste* could also mean “touch, handle”.
- 9Korsmeyer (1999); Stoller (1989); Classen (1997); Howes (2003, 2005); Korsmeyer (2005); Howes & Classen (2014).
- 10See also Caseau (Chapter 13), Hitch (Chapter 1) and Telò (Chapter 4).
- 11Rakova (2003: 34–47) argues for a cross-linguistic neurophysiological basis for many taste metaphors: English *hot*, for example, of spicy food (because it makes one sweat), or *sour*, of an unfriendly expression (because it expresses wincing or makes one wince).
- 12English *choose* is derived ultimately from P-IE *ǵeus, a root it shares with Greek γεύω and Latin *gusto* “I taste”.
- 13Cicero, *On Ends* (*De finibus*) 2.24.
- 14Bourdieu ([1979] 1984).
- 15Purcell (2003); see also Gowers (1993, 1997).
- 16Horace, *Satires* 2.4.35–6. Gowers (1993: 135–42).
- 17Lucilius 603W = Warmington (1935–8). See Banducci (Chapter 7) on fish consumption in Republican Italy.
- 18Seneca, *Epistles* 95.27–8.
- 19For the power of this binary opposition in Athens, see Davidson (1995).
- 20Pliny, *Natural History* (*Historia naturalis*) 10.29.56; Goody (1982: 102–5); Dalby (2002a, 2002b).
- 21Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* (*Tusculanae disputationes* 5.34.97).
- 22See Totelin (Chapter 3) and Paulas (Chapter 12) on flavour terminology in ancient philosophical and medical texts. For example, Plato, *Timaeus* 65c–66c adds “harsh”, “astringent” and “pungent” to the list.
- 23Pliny, *Natural History* 31.43.94. On Roman fish sauce, see Banducci (Chapter 7) and Baker (Chapter 8).
- 24On which, see Rudolph (Chapter 2).
- 25Clements (2013).
- 26Gowers (1993: 40–6).
- 27Horace, *The Art of Poetry* (*Ars poetica*) 374–8.
- 28Horace, *Epistles* 2.2.59–65.
- 29For garlic as the “taste” of the *Epodes*, see Gowers (1993: 280–310).
- 30Cf. Petronius, *Satyricon* 37.1: *non potui amplius gustare*, “I could not taste anything more”, after a particularly excruciating pun.
- 31See Rimell (2002: 11) on sensory overload at the Cena.
- 32Gosling & Taylor (1982: 18); Mintz (1985: 155), noting that Latin *suauiis* “sweet” and *suadere* “persuade” come from the same P-IE root.
- 33Augustine (*Confessions* 3.6.10) uses this pun to tinge his sweet memory of love with bitterness: *amare et amari dulce mihi erat*, “It was sweet for me to love and be loved.” On the bitterness of sweet honey see Totelin (Chapter 3).
- 34Seneca, *Epistles* 63.5.
- 35Cicero, *On Old Age* (*De senectute*) 53, 65.
- 36Cucchiarelli (2012) on Virgil, *Eclogue* 1.3.
- 37Aeneas’ greater ambivalence towards the sweetness of Carthage (*ardet abire fuga dulcisque relinquere terras*, “he burned to flee away and leave those sweet lands”, Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.281) is caught by Servius in a famous note: *deest quamquam*, “although’ is missing”; Fowler (1990: 47).

- 38Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 10.16. See Heath (1982) on narrative and food as parallel focuses of curiosity in this novel.
- 39Fronto, *Epistles* 2.172.
- 40Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.736–40.
- 41Lyne (1989: 30); see also Austin (1971: 219–21).
- 42Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* (*De rerum natura*) 1.936–42 = 4.11–17.
- 43*Primis* or *primoribus labris gustare*; *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 2nd edn, s.v. *gustare* 4 (fig.) “to have some knowledge or experience of”.
- 44The equivalent verb is *degustare* (*Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 2nd edn, s.v. 1), used metaphorically of a “grazing” arrow (Virgil, *Aeneid* 12.376), of skimming acquaintance with e.g. a way of life (Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 5.21.61) or conversation (Brutus in Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* (*Epistulae ad Atticum*) 13.40.1) and of brief literary treatments, “touching on” (Quintilian 10.5.23). Seneca, *Epistles* 84.1–8 expresses the desirability of deep reading, rather than dilettanteish skimming, all in gustatory/digestive metaphors.
- 45*Primis* / *primoribus labris*: politics: Cicero, *Letters to Friends* (*Ad familiares*) 12.23.3; rhetoric: *On the Orator* (*De Oratore*) 1.19.87; physiology: *On the Nature of the Gods* (*De natura deorum*) 1.8.20; citizen blood: *Philippics* 2.29.71. See Otto (1890), s.v. *labrum*.
- 46Cicero, *Defence of Caelius* (*Pro Caelio*) 12.28.
- 47Augustine, *Confessions* 10.35.54.
- 48Augustine, *Confessions* 2.4.9.
- 49For a variety of interpretations, see Ferrari (1970); O’Donnell (1992: vol. 2, 126–8); Shanzer (1996). On early Christian attitudes to the enjoyment of food, see Caseau (Chapter 13); König (2012: 323–51). On eating and knowledge, see Warren (Chapter 6).
- 50See Caseau (Chapter 13) on Clement of Alexandria’s use of pigs to represent indiscriminating gluttony.
- 51Bennett (1988). See Caseau (Chapter 13): most converts to Christianity from the second century CE had pagan rather than Jewish origins.
- 52Augustine, *Confessions* 6.2.2: *plus etiam quam unum pocillum pro suo palato satis sobrio temperatum ... non ponebat ... cum suis praesentibus per sorbitiones exiguas partiretur, quia pietatem ibi quaerebat, non uoluptatem*.
- 53Augustine, *Confessions* 2.1.1; cf. 2.2.4.
- 54See Henderson ([1989] 1998) on the “ephebic” colouring of Tacitus’ Neronian narrative.
- 55Seneca, *Controversiae* 9.19: *nusquam a sinu meo dimisi puellam, ipse omnes praegustavi cibos*.
- 56Halotus: Suetonius, *Galba* 15.2. Young Galba: Suetonius, *Galba* 4.1: *Augustum puero adhuc ... apprehensa buccula dixisse: καὶ σὺ τέκνον τῆς ἀρχῆς ἡμῶν παρατρώξῃ*. The same hint is attributed to Tiberius by Tacitus and translated “*et tu, Galba, quandoque degustabis imperium*”, *Annals* 6.20, with *degustabis* glossed with *seram ac breuem potentiam significans*, “signifying late and brief power”.
- 57Either *caldum* (hot diluted wine) or an alcohol-free infusion: Dubuisson (1999: 257 n.24).
- 58Cf. Suetonius, *Nero* 33.3: Britannicus collapsed *ad primum gustum*, “on the first taste”, medically implausible for any poison known to the Romans, according to Dubuisson (1999).
- 59Henne *et al.* (1982); Havelange & Pirlot (1982); Barthes ([1959] 1983); Henderson ([1989] 1998).
- 60Roller (2006: 163–4).
- 61Possibly still Halotus (cf. Suetonius, *Galba* 15.2), though Dubuisson (1999)

believes that this was some randomly chosen attendant, not a professional.

62Suetonius, *Titus* 2.

63Tacitus, *Annals* 15.45. Thanks to Xavier Hetherington for reminding me of this passage. Livia tried to deceive Augustus by smearing with poison figs still growing on their trees (Dio 56.30).

64Claudius' elder son Drusus had already died from choking on a pear he was catching in his mouth as part of a game: Suetonius, *Claudius* 27.1.

65See Gowers (1994) on intemperate rapidity as a historiographical characteristic of Nero's reign.

66Tacitus, *Annals* 13.13; 14.2, 4, 56.

67Tacitus, *Annals* 13.34 *mollibus ... initiis* "gentle beginnings" (of the war with Armenia), 13.50 *nouis acerbitatibus* "new harshness" (of tax increases).

68The phrase is Warren's (Chapter 6). Eating and sexual initiation in Greek myth is explored in greater detail in the [next chapter](#); in Christian teaching, see Caseau (Chapter 13).

69See also Caseau (Chapter 13).

Tastes from beyond

Persephone's pomegranate and otherworldly consumption in antiquity

Meredith J. C. Warren

As this volume illustrates, the sense of taste serves a complex array of functions in antiquity. One specific way that taste works in literature is by allowing characters to access other realms by consuming some article of food from that foreign realm.¹ In some cases this allows mortal humans to breach the boundary between earth and heaven, and sometimes the boundaries are crossed by divine beings themselves. The latter is the case in the three texts examined here that detail the story of the so-called “Rape of Persephone”: the anonymous *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, as well as Ovid’s *Fasti* and *Metamorphoses*. The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* is an anonymous text probably composed between 650 and 550 BCE. Ovid lived and wrote *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti* (among other texts) in and around² Rome in the first century CE under the reign of Augustus.³ These three texts all narrate the myth of the abduction of Persephone, also called Proserpina, by the god of the underworld; while in Hades, the goddess ingests some pomegranate, rendering her sojourn in the underworld semi-permanent. Tasting the pomegranate results in a change of identity for Persephone; whereas before she belonged wholly to the cohort of Olympian deities, afterwards she is required to spend a portion of her year as Hades’ consort. The ramifications of eating food from another realm are simply assumed by the author.⁴ Using comparative texts from the Bible and from the Pseudepigrapha that showcase how humans cross the division between heaven and earth, I suggest that the *Hymn*, *Fasti* and *Metamorphoses* illustrate how taste works to transport the taster across boundaries between realms, a ramification of taste that is shared across ancient cultures and the texts they have produced.⁵ This argument represents a departure from, though not an opposition to, the vast body of scholarship that analyses

Persephone's pomegranate event as a sexual experience. Numerous scholars view the seed as either a symbol of fertility or as a metaphor for sexual intercourse, or both. The analysis presented here views the pomegranate as participating in the cross-cultural trope of hierophagy. The basic event of hierophagy⁶ involves the eating of something otherworldly, which then associates the eater with another world; in antiquity this is often the divine realm. A hierophagic analysis does not exclude the sexual element of the seed's ingestion but rather seeks to explain why eating, and particularly tasting, would be used in this way so consistently. In other words, even if we accept that Hades' actions with the seed enable him to bind Persephone to the underworld, the question why she must ingest the seed in order for the magic to work is left unanswered by evaluations that simply take for granted the sexual metaphor of the act.

The changes undergone by Persephone/Proserpina are illuminated by other examples of this kind of tasting from antiquity, namely Genesis 3 and 4 *Ezra* 14. Emerging from Jewish traditions, these texts, which can be dated, respectively, to the same time periods as the *Homeric Hymn* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, provide evidence that supports a new sensory analysis of Persephone's pomegranate experience. I have introduced the term "hierophagy" to describe this trope. Despite being a prevalent literary phenomenon, hierophagic eating is consistently overlooked.⁷ Hierophagy occurs in texts composed across many time periods and represents a long-standing cultural understanding of the ritual ramifications of consuming otherworldly food. The trope of hierophagy is a literary mechanism by which eaters gain access to divine knowledge, abilities and locations. Hierophagy is a type of eating found in literature that is transformative in that the participant in such an event becomes associated with another world in the process of the eating.

The significance of hierophagy in antiquity hinges on the porous-but-present boundary between worlds in the cultural expectation of the ancient Mediterranean.⁸ Although the most prominent boundary is between the human and divine realms, in some stories involving hierophagy other boundaries are breached. For instance, both Ovid and the author of the *Hymn* treat the Chthonic and Olympian realms as distinct;⁹ Hades rules one realm while Zeus rules another. Tasting food from another realm is one way in which such boundaries can be crossed.¹⁰

Tasting the pomegranate

The myth of Persephone's capture by Hades illustrates how pervasive hierophagic tasting and its implications were in the culture and literature of the antique world. The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* is the earliest of the Persephone stories discussed here,¹¹ and it is likely that the later *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti* were composed at least partly in response to the *Hymn*.¹² In the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, we see Demeter mourning her daughter's kidnapping.¹³ Those familiar with the story will recall how she allows nothing to grow on earth, no crops of any kind, in her grief and rage (*Hymn* 302–13). Each of the gods entreats Demeter to allow the earth to be fertile again, but she refuses. Demeter is determined not to allow any crops to grow on the earth until her daughter is returned to her.

Zeus, complicit in his own daughter's abduction by his brother Hades (78–9), is held hostage by Demeter's actions and eventually has to send Hermes to negotiate with Hades (334–9). Hades seems to obey, and tells Persephone to return to her mother (360–9) but before she leaves, Hades “stealthily gave her a honey-sweet¹⁴ pomegranate seed to eat, looking around, so that she might not stay there for all time with the venerable dark-robed Demeter” (371–4).¹⁵ The phrasing of this excerpt, which emphasizes in two places the intentional secrecy employed by Hades, suggests that Persephone's eating is not accidental; rather, it is Hades who, *knowing what the end result would be*, slips Persephone some seeds to eat in order to keep her as his wife in the underworld.¹⁶ Indeed, the phrase “looking around” (*amphi he nōmēsas*, line 373) may emphasize the furtiveness of Hades' behaviour,¹⁷ describing how he looks around himself, hoping that he is not observed as he tricks his stolen bride into consuming the fruit.

That Persephone consumes pomegranate at all is peculiar. The ordinary food of divine beings is nectar and ambrosia. Greeks and Romans understood a division between divine and mortal foods – a division that reflects “the wider symbolic economy” that distinguishes gods from human beings in culinary terms.¹⁸ Ambrosia and nectar are the food of the gods in Greek traditions.¹⁹ This divine food is reserved for the gods and seems to be the source of immortality.²⁰ This food is ordinarily kept away from mortal people; for instance, when the goddess Calypso dines together with Odysseus, “the nymph set before him every kind of food and drink that mortal men will take. Calypso sat down face-to-face with the king and the women served her nectar and ambrosia.”²¹ When human beings do interact with ambrosia or

nectar, they do not eat it,²² but rather it is poured on or into their bodies in order to prevent, for example, the corruption of a corpse,²³ or in the case of Achilles, to preserve his body through divine nourishment.²⁴ It seems that ambrosia must be consumed through the mouth to have its full effect.²⁵ Above all, ambrosia as divine food is always contrasted with mortal food.²⁶

When gods do consume human foods in literature, it is usually in the context of hospitality, the gods having taken on mortal disguises.²⁷ However, this is not the case in the Persephone myth. This is not a case of hospitality, where tables are heaped with good foods described using rich language. The tiny pomegranate seed is out of place here for two reasons: it is marked as an unusual food for a goddess to consume, in that it is *not* ambrosia, and it is unusual in the context of the absence of banquet. These two aspects then serve to highlight the potential for transformation that its ingestion will bring about. Persephone's food is marked;²⁸ the pomegranate therefore foreshadows that this ingestion – and its ramifications – are out of the ordinary.

The sweet taste that the seeds have is likewise marked. Even present-day pomegranates, bred for their sweetness, are still better described as tart; in contrast, wild pomegranates are described as “extremely acidic”.²⁹ The food of the gods in the Greek tradition is also associated with honey and sweet tastes.³⁰ In the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* 559–62 this is made explicit, and Porphyry, writing much later, also associates the food of the gods with honey.³¹ This sweet taste operates as a symbol by which the eater interprets his or her experience. Sweetness is representative³² and participates in culturally governed expectations of meaning. The fact that these pomegranate seeds are explicitly described as “honey-sweet” (*meliēdēs*) may highlight the special nature of this food as opposed to an ordinary, often sour, pomegranate seed.

When Demeter finally sees her daughter and embraces her, her first emotion is not relief but anxiety, as if Demeter can tell that Persephone is changed in some way:

τῇ δὲ [φίλῃν ἔτι παῖδα ἑῆς μετὰ χερσὶν ἐχούσῃ]
α[ἰ]ψα δόλον θυμός τιν' οἶσατο, τρέσσε δ' ἄρ' αἰνῶς]
πα[υ]ομ[έν]η φιλότῃτος, ἄφαρ δ' ἐρεεῖνετο μύθῳ·]
Τέκνον μή ῥά τί μοι σ[ύ] γε πάσσαις νέρθεν ἐοῦσαι]
βρώμης; ἐξαύδα, [μὴ κεῦθ', ἵνα εἰδομεν ἄμφω·]
ὥς μὲν γάρ κ' ἀνιοῦσαι ἐοῦσαι π[α]ρὰ στρυγεροῦ Αἴδαο] 395

καὶ παρ' ἔμοι καὶ πατρὶ κελ[αινεφεί Κρονίῳνι]
ναιετάοις πάντεσσι τετιμ[ένη ἀθανάτοι]σιν.
εἰ δέ, πτᾶσα πάλιν <σύ γ'> ἰοῦσ' ὑπ[ὸ κεύθεσι γαίης]
οἰκῆσεις ὥρέων τρίτατον μέρ[ος εἰς ἐνιαυτόν,]
τὰς δὲ δύο παρ' ἔμοί τε καὶ [ἄλλοις ἀθανά]τοισιν.

[While holding her dear child in her arms], her [heart
suddenly sensed a trick. Fearful she] drew back
from [her embrace and at once inquired:]
“My child, tell me, you [did not taste] food [while below?]
Speak out [and hide nothing, so we both may know.]
[For if not], ascending [from miserable Hades],
you will dwell with me and your father, the
dark-clouded [son of Kronos], honoured by all the gods.
But if [you tasted food], returning beneath [the earth],
you will stay a third part of the seasons [each year],
but two parts with myself and the other immortals.”³³

Demeter is concerned with whether Persephone has “tasted” food while she was in Hades – the verb *pateomai* (398) connotes not just the ingestion of food but also the tasting of it.³⁴ The implications of this verb are important, given the usual silence in Greek literature about how food tastes. As Hitch explores in [Chapter 1](#), abundance is usually emphasized over aesthetic quality, and when taste is an operative descriptor, it is usually used metaphorically. Using this verb, as opposed to an unmarked verb of eating such as *esthiō*, especially when the object consumed also has the aesthetic descriptor “sweet”, implies that taste is a significant factor in Persephone’s experience.

When pressed, Persephone admits that Hades forced her to eat something sweet: “but he stealthily put in my mouth a food honey-sweet, a pomegranate seed, and compelled me against my will and by force to taste it” (411–13).³⁵ Persephone’s words here are almost identical to those in 371–4 when the narrator describes Hades giving her the seed. In this section, Persephone is emphatic that she has *tasted*(*pateomai*) the honey-sweet pomegranate.³⁶ The implications of this experience are clear to Demeter, who, like Hades, is fully aware of the rules: Persephone is bound to the underworld if she has tasted food there.³⁷ The potential danger of tasting food was acknowledged in the ancient world; as Hitch observes in [Chapter 1](#), “Once food is consumed, it cannot return to its previous state, and by extension, in

Greek thought the irreversible change brought about by ingestion can affect the eater too.” Zeus, too, is cognizant of the law governing otherworldly tasting, for he proclaims that Persephone, as Demeter feared and Hades hoped, “would spend one-third of the revolving year in the misty dark and two-thirds with her mother and the other immortals” (445–7).³⁸ The seasonality of pomegranate may also be significant; while other fruit is harvested at the end of summer, pomegranates become ripe during the winter months, precisely when Persephone resides in Hades, corresponding with the bleak mourning period observed by Demeter. The type of fruit ingested by the goddess therefore seems to indicate the temporal restrictions imposed on her; a winter fruit points to a winter in Hades. Here (and again in 463–6) Zeus uses the same phrasing that Demeter does in 390–400; the repetition drives home the ramifications of eating the pomegranate. The *Homeric Hymn* expresses not only the significance of tasting food from another realm but also the idea that this kind of tasting is governed by cosmic law.

A significant reinterpretation of the Persephone myth is found in Latin, in a poem composed by Ovid under the reign of Augustus, some half a millennium after the *Homeric Hymn*. In Ovid’s version of the myth in *Metamorphoses*, Proserpina, as she is called in the Latin tradition, unintentionally binds herself to Hades when she happens to pluck a pomegranate. Proserpina is transformed by the pomegranate, in keeping with the series of other transformations detailed by Ovid throughout the *Metamorphoses*.³⁹ In contrast to the *Homeric Hymn*, Ovid does not describe Pluto (Hades, in Greek) as having a direct role in feeding Proserpina the food. We read that by the time she is returned to her mother,

quoniam ieiunia uirgo
soluerat et, cultis dum simplex errat in hortis,
puniceum curua decerpserat arbore pomum
sumptaue pallenti septem de cortice grana
presserat ore suo

the maiden had broken
her fast and, while wandering innocently in the well-kept gardens,
had plucked a crimson fruit from a bending tree
and taken seven seeds from its pale rind
and pressed them to her mouth.⁴⁰

In *Metamorphoses*, Proserpina takes the food of her own accord,⁴¹ perhaps not aware of the ramifications. When she is discovered, and as the gods determine the right course of action, Jupiter as judge invokes a certain cosmic law pertaining to this issue, namely that Proserpina may leave the underworld only if she has not eaten any food from that place: “Proserpina will return to heaven, / but on this clear condition, that she has not touched any food / there with her mouth; for so it was decided by the compact of the Fates.”⁴² Both Jupiter, and Ascalaphus, the underworld’s gardener, in describing what he saw, use a curious phrase to describe Proserpina’s interaction with the pomegranate. Ascalaphus says that she “pressed them to her mouth” while Jupiter’s condition is that she has not “touched any food there with her mouth”. Thus, as in *Homeric Hymn*, the language used to describe Proserpina’s ingestion of the seeds is unusual. Given the close relationship between the texts, it would not be surprising if Ovid used this curious phrase to evoke the “tasting” made explicit in the *Hymn*, especially since lips, as much as tongues, were considered organs of taste in antiquity.⁴³

In the end, Jupiter compromises; Ceres (Demeter, in Greek) must share custody of Proserpina with her daughter’s abductor-turned-husband as a result of her tasting of the fruit.

But, mediating between his brother and his grieving sister,
Jupiter, divided the revolving year equally:
now the goddess, a deity common to the two realms,
is with her mother for as many months as the months she is with
her husband.⁴⁴

The division between realms – that of the upper realm and that of the lower – is explicitly negotiated in the *Metamorphoses* through the ingestion of pomegranate. This underworld meal redefines Proserpina’s relationship with her original realm where the other Olympian deities dwell and associates her instead with the gods of the underworld. She is, in effect, transformed by her experience, from a goddess of the upper realm to one who straddles the two; this metamorphosis is brought about by those seven seeds and confirmed by Jupiter when he hears what she has done. Jupiter’s pronouncement does not bring about this change – Proserpina’s reaction to his decree, the brightening of her disposition recounted in 5.568–71, rather reflects her relief at being returned at least part time to her mother.⁴⁵ The identity change Proserpina undergoes has already taken place by

the time Jupiter makes his judgement, since it is dependent, as he articulates in 5.530–2, on her having consumed underworldly food.

Ovid gives a similar version of the myth in *Fasti*. As in other renditions, in this account, when Proserpina is abducted to Dis' own realm (4.445–6), Ceres searches the entire realm to which she has access. Here, the normally strict division between worlds is made explicit in the emphasis placed on Ceres searching the *entire* upper world for her daughter:

For at one time she looks down on incense-gathering Arabs, at another on Indians; next Libya is below, next Meroe and the parched land. Now she approaches the Hesperians – the Rhine, the Rhone, the Po, and you, Thybris, destined to be the parent of a powerful water. Where am I being carried? It's a huge task to tell the lands she roamed. No place in the world is omitted by Ceres. She roams in heaven too, and speaks to the constellations nearest to the icy pole, which are immune from the watery ocean.⁴⁶

Ceres is only capable of searching the upper realm, including the earth and sky, and must eventually be told where Proserpina is. Ceres' quest is also found in *Metamorphoses* 5.438–59; the goddess searches for her daughter on land and in the sea (5.434; cf. 5.462–3, *Hymn* 2.43–4). In all three texts, the authors emphasize the breadth and depth of Ceres/Demeter's search. Proserpina/Persephone remains hidden not for lack of trying – her mother has searched in every possible location available to her, while the underworld exists on a different plane, inaccessible to the gods of the upper realm. Ceres' limited search thus illustrates that Proserpina, Ceres and Jupiter exist in one realm, while the King of the Underworld exists in another.

Eventually Ceres discovers that her daughter has been taken to the “third kingdom” (*tertia regna*) – the underworld (*Fasti* 4.584). This same location is singled out by *Metamorphoses* as well as the *Hymn* as distinct from the upper realms of the earth and the heavens. In the *Hymn*, Demeter warns her daughter that remaining in the depths of the earth⁴⁷ is the consequence of breaking her fast. In *Metamorphoses*, Ovid likewise depicts the underworld as a foreign realm, ordinarily inaccessible to the gods of the upper realm (5.492; 501–8). Ceres then begs Jupiter to annul the marriage-by-capture; he is willing, but sets certain, by now familiar, conditions. “If it happens that your heart cannot be moved, and is set to break the bonds of a marriage once joined, then let us try to do just that”, Jupiter tells Ceres, “if only she

has remained fasting. If not she will be the wife of an underworld husband.”⁴⁸ To Ceres’ dismay, in this version as well, her daughter has broken her fast on some pomegranate seeds (4.607–8). As in *Metamorphoses*, Ceres immediately understands the ramifications of this tiny taste, and further explains her grief by declaring that just as Proserpina no longer calls heaven home, neither will Ceres (4.610–14). This statement, though hyperbolic on the part of Ceres, highlights the very real change that Proserpina has undergone: just as Ceres was unable to access the underworld by her nature as a goddess of the upper realm, now Proserpina properly belongs to the “third kingdom”. Proserpina’s hierophagy therefore amounts to more than a simple marriage-by-capture, where the bride now resides in her husband’s home; rather, the abduction would have been ineffective by itself to bring about Proserpina’s bond to the underworld. Tasting the pomegranate effects a change that renders her association with the underworld semi-permanent, even if she does return to her mother for half the year. She is now a goddess of that third kingdom and can only visit her former home.

Proserpina/Persephone’s experience with these seeds hardly constitutes a meal – no one in antiquity would recognize it as such, since it lacks the two major components of wine and bread. Further, in viewing it in contrast to other examples of deities-in-disguise eating non-ambrosial foods, the seeds seem even more insignificant – the plentiful banquet depicted in *Metamorphoses* 8.616–724 contains multiple courses of rich and abundant food.⁴⁹ That Persephone consumes such a small unit of food signals the event as distinct from ordinary ingestion.

Two things are made apparent through this analysis of the Persephone stories: first, Ovid and the author of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* share ideas about food-transformation both with each other and with other texts from the ancient Mediterranean, as I will illustrate shortly. Whether Hades or Heaven, the same cultural rules apply: food from another world, when eaten, binds the eater to that place. Second, in *Metamorphoses*, *Fasti* and the *Homeric Hymn* the gods, at the very least, know that these gustatory regulations exist. Jupiter is bound by this rule in Ovid’s versions, and is unable to completely return Persephone to her mother; in the *Homeric Hymns* Hades takes advantage of this restriction and purposely feeds Persephone the food which binds her to himself and his world.

Sensory intimacy, social intimacy

One of the reasons why taste brings about Persephone's identity transformation is because sharing tastes with others establishes a bond among the eaters. Thus, the binding effect of the pomegranate's taste can be elucidated by looking at the sociology of taste. A bond is accomplished through the intimacy of taste when compared with other senses.⁵⁰ If smells evoke the presence of the gods in public,⁵¹ then taste, in the mouth and on the lips and tongue, represents interaction with another realm in a very private way. In the act of eating and tasting, the sense-object is actually internalized by the eater. For this reason, this form of interaction with another world has more profound repercussions than, for example, discourse with a being from a foreign realm, or in the case of Persephone, even being in the physical location of that other realm: tasting otherworldly foods brings about a bond between the eater and the realm to which the ingested food belongs. Taste accomplishes this transformation because of its intimacy.⁵² The privacy of the sense of taste (as opposed to the shared, "objective" senses of sight or hearing) suggests that hierophagy exploits the intimacy of taste to express its meaning.

The social implications of sharing this intimate sense in antiquity supports the idea that tasting food from another realm metamorphoses the eater.⁵³ A key social aspect of the sense of taste resides in how it signifies and effects community formation – common meals promote group formation and cohesion, and are frequently used in initiatory contexts to establish or renew community membership.⁵⁴ While community is not an explicit concern of the myths, the social implications of taste illuminate the literary role of the pomegranate; in the social world, sharing a meal creates a bond not just between co-eaters of a meal, but also between the provider of the food and the consumer of it, as in the case of Hades and Persephone.⁵⁵ While host and guest bond through shared tasting of a meal, as Hitch points out in [Chapter 1](#), providing food to guests also establishes the power of the host; thus by accepting the host's food, the guest concomitantly accepts his power.⁵⁶ So Hades, in providing the few seeds, might be seen as asserting his authority over Persephone. Meals were shared among members of a group that was already established, for example a family or a guild, but they could also create new associations. Ancient writers, like modern scholars, were conscious of how meals established and reinforced social bonds. Plutarch considers the common meal a place where friendship is forged. He remarks upon

this quality most memorably when he writes, “A guest comes to share not only meat, wine and dessert, but conversation, fun and the amiability that leads to friendship.”⁵⁷ Sharing a meal does more than fill the stomach; it also forges relationships among diners. Modern anthropologists argue that food also creates a bond between the eater and the provider of food through its incorporation into the consumer.⁵⁸ In eating food, the eater brings into him- or herself the qualities imbued in the food, including the social (or other) stratification implied in the meal, the culturally loaded symbolism of the food itself and the memory of previous meals consumed in similar or different ways. The fact that Persephone tastes food which, for her, is out of the ordinary creates tension within the existing Olympian-Chthonic narrative structure.⁵⁹ In tasting the honey-sweet pomegranate, Persephone gains privileged access to the other realm – Hades – which necessitates her participation in it.

Hierophagy in a broader context

In order to understand the pattern into which Persephone’s taste experience fits, it is useful to examine other examples of this kind of eating, even examples from other cultural traditions that may have interacted in antiquity. In this section, I offer two examples from Jewish antiquity – Genesis and 4 Ezra – to help contextualize hierophagy and its role in the Persephone story. That neither comparator emerges from the geographical areas which produced the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* or Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti* serves to illustrate the pervasiveness of the use of taste to depict boundary crossing in literature, whether poetry or narrative. These texts participate, like the *Homeric Hymn*, *Fasti* and *Metamorphoses*, in the common cultural imagination of the ancient Mediterranean and therefore shed light on the societal expectations about how distinct realms interact. The common use of hierophagy as a means by which foreign realms are entered into rather reflects a shared ancient expectation about the ramifications of ingesting otherworldly food.⁶⁰ Genesis 3 depicts the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden after they disobey God and consume fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. This story has also been interpreted as a “simple metaphor for intercourse” whereby ancient authors euphemistically describe the first sexual contact and the subsequent “carnal knowledge”.⁶¹ However, I propose that the use of ingestion as

a metaphor for carnal knowledge functions precisely because of taste's role in hierophagy: that it transmits knowledge from one realm to another. It is in this capacity that I analyse the fruit here. Dating to before the sixth century BCE,⁶² Genesis 3 represents a world-view roughly contemporaneous with that preserved in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*.⁶³ 4 Ezra is a late first-century CE Jewish apocalypse in which the main character, Ezra, asks God a series of questions about the destruction of Israel and God's responsibility for his chosen people; there is no sexual element in this example of hierophagy. In both comparators, the main characters are transported to another realm as a result of consuming otherworldly food. Adam and Eve consume "the forbidden fruit" and are expelled from Paradise, while Ezra receives a cup of fiery liquid from God and is soon thereafter taken up to heaven. The boundary between heaven and earth is breached in each text by the tasting of an item from that other realm.

The Genesis story narrates Adam and Eve's eviction from Eden. Eden contains two named trees: the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life. Their removal from Paradise occurs as a direct result of their ingestion of the fruit of the former tree and is in order to prevent their tasting of the latter. Their hierophagic experience is truncated by God, who expels them from Eden before they are able to accomplish their full transformation.

Eve examines the fruit and determines that it is "good for food", among other things:

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.⁶⁴

In other words, Eve experiences the fruit synaesthetically and understands through seeing the fruit that it will taste good.⁶⁵ She eats some and gives some to Adam to eat. The couple then experiences an awakening of sorts in that they become "wise", as the text puts it, and realize that they are naked. However, God's experience of their hierophagic experience is different; Adam and Eve have not just seized knowledge, but have brought about a transformation: "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil" (3:22). In tasting

this fruit, Eve and Adam have become closer to the divine realm. God fears that ingesting the fruit of the Tree of Life (3:22) would render Adam and Eve fully divine, and so ejects them from the garden lest he “reach out his hand and take also of the Tree of Life, and eat, and live forever – therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden” (3:22–3).⁶⁶ As in the *Homeric Hymn* and Ovid, then, the god of Genesis also understands the ramifications of consuming food from another realm. The curses that God imposes on the humans and their subsequent expulsion from Eden in Genesis 3:22–24 are the results of tasting the “good to eat” fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Thus, the Eden narrative reflects the tension typical of hierophagic events, wherein the boundaries between realms are breached.

This kind of boundary-crossing is also depicted in *4 Ezra*, a Jewish apocalypse written in Palestine around 100 CE.⁶⁷ *4 Ezra* clearly espouses a divide between the heavenly and earthly realms, in particular because the text makes use of an angelic interlocutor to bridge the division between the two regions.⁶⁸ Throughout the narrative, Ezra’s divine revelations become more sensually intimate: first Ezra only hears and speaks with the angelic mediator (3:1–9:25), then he receives visions (9:26–13:58), and finally, at the climax, Ezra tastes a heavenly substance (14:38–41).⁶⁹ The final revelation changes the way Ezra interacts with the divine realm: after tasting the fire-coloured liquid, Ezra not only gains unmediated access to divine wisdom,⁷⁰ but is also physically taken up into heaven.

A voice called me, saying, “Ezra, open your mouth and drink what I give you to drink.” Then I opened my mouth and behold, a full cup was offered to me; it was full of something like water, but its colour was like fire. And I took it and drank; and when I had drunk it, my heart poured forth understanding, and wisdom increased in my breast, for my spirit retained its memory; and my mouth was opened, and was no longer closed.⁷¹

This liquid, and indeed, this pattern, evokes the memory of a biblical scene in which the prophet Ezekiel ingests a sweet-tasting scroll from Heaven (Ezekiel 2:8–3:3; cf. Revelation 10:2–11). Ezekiel (and Revelation later) describes the scroll he tastes as “like honey”, reminiscent of the sweet-tasting ambrosia consumed by the Greek and Roman gods, and associating the scroll with the realm of the God of Israel (cf. Psalms 19:11). After consuming the contents of the cup, Ezra is assumed into heaven – God tells Ezra that he will be taken up

like others before him, “until the times are ended” (14:50). Although verses 49–50 do not occur in the later Latin version of *4 Ezra*, the verses were in fact part of the original text.⁷² The original narrative, then, includes repercussions for Ezra when he tastes the divine beverage. Whatever heavenly liquid Ezra has tasted in ingesting his beverage, it has confirmed his divine association in his transportation to the heavenly realm. These changes in Ezra – his wisdom and his divine association – come about because of his privileged and intimate access to God, which is only brought about through the intimacy of taste.

The ramifications of Persephone’s taste of underworldly fruit participate in the expectations held in antiquity about eating and drinking food from other realms.⁷³ That tasting food is transformative is clearly seen in the awareness displayed by divine creatures in *4 Ezra* and Genesis, as it is in depictions of ambrosia in ancient literature. Calypso, for example, sets her table with two distinct meals: one of sweet ambrosia for herself, and one of ordinary mortal food for Odysseus.⁷⁴ This division between the members of each realm is articulated in what each category of beings consumes. Even though Persephone and Hades are both deities – and are even related – they initially belong to different realms; Hades belongs to the Chthonic realm and Persephone to the Olympian. Tasting food from another realm, however, creates a bridge to the underworld and brings about the metamorphosis of a deity from a being of one realm to another, as Ovid and the author of the *Hymn* are both aware.

Conclusion

Tasting food from another world allows the eater to cross the semi-permeable boundary between heaven and earth, or in the case of Persephone, between the Chthonic and Olympian realms. Not only are these boundaries breached, they are irrevocably so. When Persephone consumes the pomegranate seeds she is bound to Hades just as Ezra’s cup of heavenly liquid enables him to be assumed into heaven; likewise Adam and Eve are also expelled from Paradise lest they become divine like God. The various renditions of the Persephone story also illustrate the extent to which the ancient world takes for granted the ramifications of consuming otherworldly food. In both the *Homeric Hymn* and Ovid, the gods are fully aware of the cosmic requirements to which they are bound, just as, in *4 Ezra* and Genesis,

the mechanism by which Ezra and the first humans are rendered (partially) divine is not explained to the reader; rules governing hierophagy are simply assumed to be common knowledge among characters and the audience alike. In other words, the trope is assumed to be understood widely. It is accepted without question in each of these texts that boundaries between different realms are permeable.

When Persephone tastes the pomegranate seeds,⁷⁵ her abduction to Hades is rendered semi-permanent. The discussion held by the gods indicates that her visit to the underworld might have been temporary but for her ingestion of some food from that realm. The intent of Hades himself does not alter the fact that Persephone is bound to his realm by this meal; whether he stealthily feeds her the seeds as in the *Hymn* or whether their ingestion is unintentional as in *Fasti* and *Metamorphoses*, the outcome is the same.

Although the examples treated in the comparative texts, Genesis 3 and 4 Ezra 14, involve men, and Persephone is female, this gender difference is not significant. Hierophagy occurs equally across genders. Aseneth (*Joseph and Aseneth*) and Perpetua (*The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*) are both female subjects of hierophagic events, while Lucius (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*), Ezra (4 Ezra) and John (the Book of Revelation) are male. As such, gender analysis has not featured in this discussion; however, the fact that this trope occurs with both male and female subjects might suggest that the sexual element observed in the Persephone accounts by some scholars⁷⁶ is rendered less prominent when viewed in the context of this cross-gender approach – after all, there is nothing sexual about Ezra’s experience, nor is there any sexual element in other hierophagic events experienced by the aforementioned female subjects.⁷⁷

The effectiveness of hierophagy in narrative corresponds to the role of taste in historical antiquity; hierophagy participates in accepted conventions governing the social and sensory intimacy of shared tasting. Even though Hades does not share in the meal, as host and provider of food, he participates in the binding of the eater by means of taste, just as historical meals are understood to create a social bond among mortal and/or divine diners. Likewise, although Persephone is physically already in Hades, the permanence of her visit is only realized when she internalizes some element of that realm, namely the seeds. The intimacy of the sweet taste, marked as extraordinary in the text, effects Persephone’s metamorphosis. Persephone’s bond with the underworld (Hades) and with its god (Hades) is transformed when she

tastes the pomegranate: the intimacy and power of the sense of taste forever associates her with that realm.⁷⁸

- 1On the senses generally in antiquity, see M. M. Smith (2007), Toner (2014); on angelic foods, see Nicklas (2010), Goodman (1986); on other worlds and travel to them in antique literature, see Niklas *et al.* (2010), Sulzbach (2010); on hierophagy, see Warren (2006, 2015).
- 2Ovid spent some time in exile and wrote a portion of *Fasti* outside of Rome proper. See Hill (1992: 1–2).
- 3For further discussion of the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, see Richardson (1974: 5–12) and Foley (1994: 28–31, 79–83); for further discussion of Ovid’s historical, political and social context, see Hill (1992: 1–4).
- 4This is also the case in many modern examples of this kind of eating. Examples from our own era include the “eat me” cake (Carroll 1992: 13) and “drink me” beverage (which tastes like “cherry-tart, custard, pine-apple, roast turkey, toffy, and hot buttered toast” (Carroll, 1992: 11), distinguishing it from something medicinal) from *Alice in Wonderland*, the sweet Turkish delight in C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and two scenes from the 2001 Japanese film *Spirited Away*, among others. Although these characters are human, the pattern of crossing a boundary to another world persists.
- 5Another example from Roman antiquity, which space prevents me from analysing in the present chapter, is from Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*; see below, and more completely, my forthcoming monograph, *Hierophagy: Transformational Eating in Ancient Literature* (Warren forthcoming). Regarding the Persephone narrative, Suter (2002) discusses the *Hymn* from a psychoanalytical perspective as well as from an anthropological one. She rejects the idea that the pomegranate episode represents a marriage (94–5) and instead favours an understanding of the pomegranate as inherently sexual (22, 83, 90, 97). Myres (1938) concludes that the pomegranate acts as a love charm in that Hades, in rubbing it on himself in some kind of magical act, binds Persephone to himself; Bonner (1939), responding to Myres, views the seed as a fertility charm (esp. p. 4) encapsulated in the seed by Hades’ action of moving the seed around himself (as opposed to rubbing it on himself). Faraone (1990) outlines the use of sweet fruits in popular love charms (although at least half of the examples given involve throwing rather than ingesting the fruit; see esp. 238).
- 6Nicolae Roddy (personal communication, 2007) suggested “hierophagy”, which I have since adopted. Desroches (1973: 40 n.18) mentions the neologism, crediting F. A. Isambert (1966: 184), but the term does not occur in that publication of Isambert. See also Pfister (1948: 262), who simply defines hierophagy as a “sacral meal [which] represents the eating of the god or of the holy entity”. My use of the term here represents a significant development from these earlier brief allusions.
- 7For my complete definition of the category of hierophagy and a discussion of other texts which make use of the trope, see Warren (forthcoming).
- 8By “cultural expectation” I mean knowledge passed down as part of the cultural heritage of ancient communities, knowledge that would have been commonly accepted among culturally literate participants in the ancient world. Here, I follow Richard Horsley’s use of the term “cultural repertoire” (2007: esp. 128–9) and David Carr’s discussion of how cultural-religious traditions are communicated in antiquity (2005: esp. 3–14).
- 9For a discussion of the use of these terms in cult practice, see Scullion (1994).
- 10In biblical texts, other examples of boundary crossing abound, for instance in

texts which describe divinely sent visions to prophets. Taste as a mechanism for boundary crossing is under examination here because this mechanism has been completely neglected to this point.

- 11 See Richardson (1974: 74–86) for a full discussion of other literary versions of the myth. The myth of Persephone's capture is briefly mentioned in Hesiod, *Theogony* 9.14, and also appears in Pamphos, *Hymn to Demeter* (preserved in Pausanias 1.38.3, 8.37.9, 9.31.9); Orphic *Argonautika* 1191–6; Orphic hymns 18, 29, 41, 43; Euripides, *Helen* 1301–68; Isocrates, *Panegyrikos* 28–9; Callimachos, *Hymn* 6; Nicander, *Theriaca* 483–7, *Alexipharmaca* 129–32; Apollodorus, *Library* 1.5.1–3; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica* 5.3–5; Cicero, *Against Verres* 2.4; Virgil *Georgics* 1.39; Lucan *Civil Wars* 6.698–700, 739–42; Lactantius Placidus on Statius *Thebaid* 5.347; Claudian, *On the Rape of Proserpina*; Nonnos, *Dionysiaca* 6.1–168; Second Vatican Mythographer 94–100. Of these, Apollodorus mentions the pomegranate, stating that Pluto gave the seed to the Maid and she, “not foreseeing the consequences”, ate it.
- 12 Hinds (1987: 51–98).
- 13 Persephone falls to the underworld when reaching for a fragrant narcissus flower (*Hymn* 5–14). The sensory implications of this event of relocation are no doubt significant, but beyond the scope of this chapter. For a brief discussion of tempting fragrances, see Hitch, [Chapter 1](#).
- 14 The sweet taste is also a feature of other examples of hierophagy, such as in *The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas*, *Joseph and Aseneth* and the Book of Revelation. For a discussion of its significance in these texts, see Warren (forthcoming).
- 15 αὐτὰρ ὃ γ' αὐτὸς / ροιῆς κόκκον ἔδωκε φαγεῖν μελιγδέα λάθρῃ / ἀμφὶ ἔνομήσας, ἵνα μὴ μένοι ἥματα πάντα / αὖθι παρ' αἰδοίῃ Δημήτρει κυανοπέπλῳ. Translation mine.
- 16 For a discussion of the potential relationship between the pomegranate meal in the *Hymn* and actual Athenian marriage, see Foley (1994: 107–9). She notes that “the bride's acceptance of food was a form of acknowledging the groom's authority over her” (108) and that the ingestion of some ritual food (quince in Plutarch, *Life of Solon* 89C or wedding cake in Aristophanes, *Peace* 869) was part of the marriage rite. As has been noted by other scholars (see note 5 above) sexual experiences follow; see also Suter (2002), Sutton (1981: 153–4).
- 17 Richardson (1974: 277). Foley (1994: 56) opts to interpret the phrase as referring to a magical rite by which Hades binds Persephone to himself through the movement of the pomegranate seed around his captive; this interpretation is unnecessary in light of my analysis, which proposes that the eating of otherworldly food is binding in and of itself, and does not require additional magical actions. See also Myres (1938) and Bonner (1939).
- 18 Clements (2015: 52). The banquet of the Phaeacians (*Odyssey* 8), the banquet served by Tantalus (Pindar, *Olympian Odes* 1.26–7) and the meal hosted by Baucis and Philemon (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.621–96) might seem like exceptions, where gods do consume human food. Tantalus attempts to serve a monstrous human sacrifice to the gods who attend his banquet; aside from human flesh being out of the realm of normal mortal food, only Demeter eats at the banquet, and she does so only because she is distracted by her grief at Persephone's absence. Baucis and Philemon do set out a table for their divine guests, and items of food, including eggs and cheese, are described, but the only reference to ingestion is to the wine jug, which mysteriously refills itself each time Baucis refills the cups; indeed, the gods actually prevent the host couple from serving them meat by revealing their divine identities. As for the banquet of the Phaeacians, the gods are lauded in song but do not attend the

meal.

- 19 See, in this volume, Gowers (Chapter 5) on ambrosia as a metaphor for sweet kisses, and Hitch (Chapter 1) on wine so tasty that it is compared to this divine food. Hitch also addresses the dining event between Calypso and Odysseus in *Odyssey* 5.194–9 (see also below, this chapter). There, Hitch observes, the divine and mortal share space, allowing human proximity to the divine, but not food, marking their distinct natures.
- 20 Ambrosia literally means immortality (*LSJ*, s.v. “ἀμβροσία”; *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s.v. “Ambrosia”). On the gods’ consumption of ambrosia and nectar as opposed to mortal food, see Homer, *Iliad* 5.342. At *Odyssey* 5.135, Calypso indicates that she would have made Odysseus immortal but for Zeus’ command through Hermes.
- 21 Homer, *Odyssey* 5.217–20, trans. Fagles (1996).
- 22 Tantalus, a son of Zeus (and therefore half-divine), was invited to share the gods’ table and their immortal food, but squandered his opportunity when he stole ambrosia to bring back to his drinking companions (Euripides, *Orestes* 10; Pindar, *Olympian Ode* 1.95).
- 23 For example, Patroclus’ preservation in Homer, *Iliad* 19.37–9 or Sarpedon’s in *Iliad* 16.670, 680.
- 24 Homer, *Iliad* 19.352–4. See also Bradley (2015: 4).
- 25 Apollonius, *Argonautica* 4.869–72 implies that had Thetis been successful in completely anointing Achilles with ambrosia, he would have become immortal and ageless, which contradicts this idea. Later tradition (e.g. Statius, *Achilleid* 1.122–3; 269–70; 480–1) replaces ambrosia as the mechanism of Achilles’ potential immortality with the river Styx.
- 26 Clements (2015: 50)
- 27 See Homer, *Odyssey* 1.105–49; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.616–724. The cultic practice of *theoxenia* is a separate matter; see Ekroth (2011).
- 28 I use the term “marked” to refer to the cultural encoding of certain terms, items and/or behaviours as unusual and therefore informative in the context of the familiar or ordinary (“unmarked”) categories of meaning accepted by a culture. In this use I follow, for example, Battistella (1996, 1990) and Waugh (1982: 299–318).
- 29 Stover & Mercure (2007: 1088); the chart found in Stover & Mercure (2007: 1091) outlines the range of sweetness and acidity expected in the variety of modern cultivars.
- 30 See Hitch (Chapter 1) for the poetics of sweetness in Greek literature, and Totelin (Chapter 3) for sweetness in medical and scientific texts.
- 31 Porphyry, *On the Cave of the Nymphs* (*De antro nymphaeum*) 7; Scheinberg (1979: 5); cf. Roscher (1883: 25); Kraemer (1998: 169–71).
- 32 Korsmeyer (1999: 115–18).
- 33 *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 390–400, trans. and text Foley (1994).
- 34 *LSJ*, s.v. πατέομαι; cf. *Iliad* 24.642.
- 35 αὐτὰρ ὁ λάθρη / ἔμβαλέ μοι ροιῆς κόκκον, μελιγδὲ ἔδωδῆν, / ἄκουσαν δὲ βίη με προσηνάγκασσε πάσασθαι. Suter (2002: 58) argues that Persephone willingly ingested the pomegranate and here lies to her mother in order to prevent Demeter’s anger; I prefer to believe the survivor’s own account and posit an unreliable narrator. I am grateful to Megan Goodwin for her input.
- 36 This verb is also used in line 50: “In her grief [Demeter] did not once *taste* ambrosia or nectar sweet-to-drink, nor bathed her skin.” Οὐδὲ ποτ’ ἀμβροσίης καὶ νέκταρος ἠδυπότοιο πάσσαι’ ἀκηχεμένα, οὐδὲ χροὰ βάλλετο λουτροῖς. Trans. Foley (1994).
- 37 Suter (2002: 90–7) convincingly problematizes the assumption that a marriage

takes place in Hades; thus the binding that occurs through the pomegranate event is more complex than a simple marriage ritual.

38νεῦσε δέ οἱ κόρυρην ἔτεος περιτελλομένοιο / τὴν τριτάτην μὲν μοῖραν ὑπὸ
ζόφον ἡρόεντα, / τὰς δὲ δύο παρὰ μητρὶ καὶ ἄλλοις ἀθανάτοισιν. / ὥς
ἔφατ'· οὐδ' ἀπίθησε θεὰ Διὸς ἀγγελιάων.

39Hill (1992: 2).

40Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5.534–7, trans. Hill (1992). The number seven is significant in antiquity, occurring in important foundational contexts, such as the seven hills of Rome, the seven kings of Rome, the seven wonders of the ancient world, and in literature, such as *Seven Against Thebes*. The significance in Ovid is, however, contested. Persephone ingests seven pomegranate seeds, a departure from the single seed in the *Homeric Hymn* and the three seeds in *Fasti* (4.607–8), where, as Fantham observes (1998: 207), the number of seeds is equivalent to the months spent in Hades. Cf. Hinds (1987: 89 n.39), who suggests the three seeds in *Fasti* represent the “twice three months” Proserpina spends out of the underworld (4.614). See also Richardson (1974: 276–7, 285). Seven seeds in the *Metamorphoses* may be a generally powerful (potentially magical) symbol, rather than a specific one.

41It is possible, and would be in line with Ovid’s characterization of women, that Persephone’s agency in plucking the fruit participates in what some scholars have suggested is an overarching metaphor of sex and sexuality in the myth of Persephone.

42Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5.530–3, trans. Hill (1992): *repetet Proserpina caelum, lege tamen certa, si nullos contigit illic ore cibos; nam sic Parcarum foedere cautum est.*

43As Gowers (Chapter 5) points out, particularly as regards potentially dangerous ingestion. The absence of explicit language in Ovid, aside from the general absence of tasting language in ancient literature, can also result from the fact that in neither case is Proserpina’s point of view made apparent.

44Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5.564–7, trans. Hill (1992): *at medius fratrisque sui maestaeque sororis / Iuppiter ex aequo uoluentem diuidit annum: / nunc dea, regnorum numen commune duorum, / cum matre est totidem, totidem cum coniuge menses.*

45Ceres likewise appears relieved in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5.572.

46Ovid, *Fasti* 4.569–76, trans. Wiseman & Wiseman (2011); Latin from Goold & Frazer (2003): *Nam modo turilegos Arabas, modo despicit Indos, / hinc Libys, hinc Meroë siccaque terra subest; / nunc adit Hesperios Rhenum Rhodanumque Padumque / teque, future parens, Thybri, potentis aquae, / quo feror? Immensum est erratas dicere terras: / praeteritus Cereri nullus in orbe locus. / errat et in caelo liquidique immunia ponti / adloquitur gelido proxima signa polo...*

47Homeric Hymn to Demeter 398–400: ὑπὸ κεῦθεσι γαίης.

48Ovid, *Fasti* 4.601–4, trans. Wiseman & Wiseman (2011); Latin from Goold & Frazer (2003): *sed si forte tibi non est mutabile pectus, / statque semel iuncti rumpere vincla tori, / hoc quoque temptemus, siquidem ieiuna remansit; / si minus, inferni coniugis uxor erit.*

49See Hitch (Chapter 1) for a discussion of descriptions of banquets; ancient texts tend to emphasize the quantity of food and its surplus rather than specific taste experiences at feasts.

50See Rudolph’s introduction to this volume.

51Clements (2015).

52Potter (2014: 24).

53The important role of meals in community formation in ancient communities is well established. Dennis Smith goes so far as to declare that “the idea that sharing a meal together creates a sense of social bonding appears to be a

universal symbol” Smith (2003: 14); it is not just sharing a meal at the same table which produces this community, but also *sharing tastes with a community even at a great distance*. Lalonde (1992: 82–3).

54Korsmeyer (1999: 187); Smith (2003: 14, 80); e.g. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.24.

55Hierophagic eating creates a bond between the eater of the food and the giver of the food, even when the provider of the food resides in a different world. It is important to remember that hosts and guests (providers and receivers) might not eat the same food even when dining together. Smith (2003: 11, 45). Thus, the fact that Hades does not share the pomegranate does not negate the binding effects of Persephone’s taste experience. Of course, the bond created between Hades and Persephone through this small taste of underworldly food can be, and has been, viewed as representative of the relationship between husband and wife (see above, note 17) and/or of a sexual bond formed between two lovers (see above, note 5).

56See further Hitch ([Chapter 1](#)).

57Plutarch, *Table Talk* 660b. Paul likewise recognizes this quality of sharing food. As he explains in 1 Corinthians 10:17, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” Paul also believes that a bond can be created not only between people but also between divine forces and those who share ritually marked food. He famously warns the Corinthians that they might find themselves “partners with demons” (1 Corinthians 10:20) if they share in food offered to the gods of the “pagans”.

58Weichart & van Eeuwijk (2007: 3); Douglas ([1972] 1975); Farb & Armelagos (1980: 4). The penetration of the eater by the food also has implications for understanding Persephone and the pomegranate as a sexual metaphor.

59While pomegranates might grow abundantly in the underworld, they are not normal food for Olympian deities, as I have established above.

60Another example is found in a Latin romance, Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, where Lucius is transformed back into human form by consuming roses. Thus, the concept of hierophagy is not unique to the Persephone stories, nor to Jewish lore, but is found throughout the ancient Mediterranean.

61Veenker (1999–2000); Speiser (1964: 26).

62Coogan (2006: 56); Collins (2004: 75).

63Richardson (1974: 5–11).

64Genesis 3:6–7. All translations of the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version.

65Hitch ([Chapter 1](#)) notes that “if any sense provides pleasure associated with food, it is vision”.

66The serpent suggests this in Genesis 3:5; it is also supported by various commentaries on the expulsion narrative. See, for example, Whybray (2001: 44).

67Davila (2005: 138–9).

68For a full discussion of *4 Ezra* and its use of hierophagy, and specifically the transmission of knowledge through this process, see Warren (2015).

69This sensory escalation represents a progression from public communication to more intimate interaction with the divine. Warren (2015).

70The notion of gaining knowledge through ingestion is widespread in folklore and in other biblical texts, although it attracts very little scholarly attention. For folklore, see Nagy (1985–6); for biblical texts, see Muir & Tappenden (n.d.); for ancient Greek and Roman examples, see Rudolph ([Chapter 2](#)) and Liebert (2010).

71*4 Ezra* 14:38–41. All translations of *4 Ezra* are from Stone (1990).

- 72The two lines were lost with the addition of 6 *Ezra* to the text. Stone (1990: 442); Zurawski (2014: 12 n.40).
- 73Richardson notes a few places where the belief that eating the food of the dead requires the eater to reside with the dead (1974: 276); cf. Allen *et al.* (1936). Richardson also confirms my argument above that shared meals solidify bonds among community members.
- 74Homer, *Odyssey* 5.195–9; see further Hitch ([Chapter 1](#)).
- 75The pomegranate's centrality to Persephone's story of abduction is also illustrated by its prominent use as a symbol of Persephone and Hades in art. Richardson (1974: 276).
- 76See note 5, above.
- 77Persephone's divine status prior to her experience appears to be unique, however.
- 78I am grateful to the Fonds de Recherche – Société et Culture for their support of this research.

Tastes of Roman Italy

Early Roman expansion and taste articulation

Laura M. Banducci

In the early Republican period, Rome was merely one city among many in Italy.¹ The Italian peninsula was home to many dynamic and interconnected civilizations whose settlements dotted the landscape: Etruscans, Samnites, Latins and many others. The city of Rome expanded its political control across Italy through warfare, intermarriage and colonization, so that by the middle of the third century BCE about twenty per cent of Italy was legally Roman territory.² It began to exert control over neighbouring cities and their associated landscapes; the environmental, social, political and cultural circumstances throughout the Italian peninsula changed. Simultaneously, Rome's reach extended across the Mediterranean south into North Africa and east into the lands of the Greeks.

The spread of Roman culture as Rome conquered new people is often labelled “Romanization” by scholars, but this term often implies one-sided domination, the civilizing of uncivilized peoples and homogeneity.³ In reality, Roman contact and cultural interaction with non-Romans was fluid, bilateral and varied depending on the region and individuals involved.⁴ Moreover, in the earliest period of Roman expansion, the period with which this chapter is concerned, what it meant to be “Roman” was just beginning to evolve. By the time Rome had emperors, beginning in the late first century BCE, whatever coherent idea of Romanness existed arose from Rome's contact with its Mediterranean neighbours, including other Italians and the Greeks. Preference for and appreciation of certain tastes was part of this package.

From the third century BCE, references to food and taste were frequent elements of an emerging body of literature written to express “national qualities”, despite the challenges of this growing and relatively undefined nation.⁵ Food preferences relate to culture,

ethnicity, status and the definition of community. While foods, and the tastes they convey, played a role as metaphors in a growing Latin literary corpus, as Gowers discusses in [Chapter 5](#), they were also reflective of real behaviours and preferences among Romans in Italy. Thus, the best locales for sourcing food as well as the best preparation of foods were both intimated and explicitly articulated in these texts.

In what follows we explore the close connection that food and taste have with Roman Italy as a landscape (the *terroir*) and with Rome's developing cultural identity. How do environmental determinism, taste and food choice connect or converge in Roman Italy? When do we see foods like pork and cuisine like *puls* in the material record? These tastes, which emerge in Italy during the Republican period, are ultimately exported as “Roman” tastes when Rome's political reach expands across the Mediterranean and beyond. The insights we gain in this chapter pave the way for closer examinations of animal products ([Chapter 9](#)), fruits, vegetables and seasonings ([Chapter 10](#)) and wine analysis ([Chapter 11](#)), each of which has its own unique influence on creating and transforming cultural identity.

In order to understand the relationship between tastes and landscape, we must first understand some basic facts about the geography of the Italian peninsula, which is characterized by dramatic variation. The coast has both sandy and rocky beaches, and a chain of mountains forms the spine of the country separating the coasts; rivers and fresh-water lakes allowed for excellent water communication and transport; and the mountains provided abundant wood resources and pastures for animal grazing.⁶ Geography is not, however, the sole factor in the shaping of the Italian landscape. The strain of war (both in Italy and abroad) on the regions of Italy and the reorganization of the landscape by the Roman administration also had a substantial effect on the way the city of Rome related to its environs and its Italian neighbours. Urbanization – the gathering of populations into close settlements – began in Italy during the Iron Age, but after the Roman conquest there was even more impetus to be closely connected to town or city cores. We will return to the role this notion of “environment” plays throughout the chapter.

The way ancient authors articulate taste experiences is a rich source of information about life in Rome. We will concentrate primarily on Republican era authors, especially those active in the third and second centuries BCE: the work of the statesman Cato, fragments by the poets Ennius and Lucilius and comedies by Plautus. Since none of these early authors was from the city of Rome itself,

they reflect the Roman interplay with the Greek and Italian milieux.⁷ As “cultural brokers” between Greek and Italian culture, they were largely responsible for crafting and expressing the genres, values and behaviours that would become “Roman”.⁸

In addition to the textual remains of antiquity, environmental remains provide important direct evidence for the processing, consumption and discarding of food. Archaeobotanical remains (typically seeds, chaff and weeds) reveal the landscape surrounding ancient consumers, the resources exploited or managed through foraging and farming as well as the methods of preparing plant foods.⁹ Faunal remains reveal the species exploited for labour and food and methods of animal husbandry, hunting, slaughtering and cooking.¹⁰ Ceramics provide indirect evidence for the foods people cooked, stored and consumed. Even very fragmentary pottery can reveal where a pot was made, its shape and what kinds of foodstuffs it may have contained. In the Republican period, transport amphorae would have carried wine, olive oil and fish sauce to and from Rome and its Italian hinterlands. Cooking and serving vessels suggest the types and textures of foods people tended to eat.

In what follows, I highlight some of the noted “Roman” tastes that we can tease out of these literary and material sources. I begin with the ingredients, first meats, then vegetables and grains, before turning to the herbs and spices that accompany these foods. Throughout, we will see both how *terroir* (the source of foodstuffs) and food preparation influence the notion of Roman taste in the literary and material culture of the Republican period.

“Roman” fauna: the case of fish and meat

The importance of the geographical origin of one’s food comes out most strongly in the Republican period in the discussion of fish. Textual references to fish are quite varied in their appreciation for the food, which was consumed both in filleted form and as a sauce or relish. The tastiness of fish is usually associated with its origins, and this is consistently connected to the increasing reach of the Roman state. As the Mediterranean became more of a “Roman pond” fish was not only an easy, locally accessible food, but it was also a delicacy imported from afar.

Quintus Ennius, one of our earliest Roman authors, wrote a whole poem about the sourcing of fish. The *Art of Dining* (*Hedyphetica*) is a

poem of unknown original length that survives in eleven lines quoted, supposedly by memory, in Apuleius' *Defence*:

He lists countless types of fish, which he has clearly studied carefully. I remember a few verses, which I will recite:
How the burbot (*mustela marina*) from Clupea beats all others!
There are mussels (*mures*) at Aenus and scaly oysters (*ostrea*) in great
plenty at Abydus ...

The scallop (*pecten*) is at Mitylene and in the channel of Ambracia.

The bream (*sargus*) is good at Brundisium – buy it if it's big.
5 Know that the little boar-fish (*apriculum piscen*) is first-rate at Tarentum.

Make sure it's at Surrentum that you purchase your lady-fish (*elopem*), and
from Cumae your bluefish (*glaucum*).

What of the parrot-wrasse (*scarus*)? I overlooked that! It's almost the very
brain of supreme Jupiter!

This one is caught big and fine by Nestor's homeland.

And I overlooked the thrush-wrasse, the blackbird-wrasse, the maigre
(*turдум merulamque umbramque marinam*).

10 At Corcyra men catch the octopus (*polypus*), fat flounders (*calvaria*
pinguia), sea-perch (*acarnae*)

the purple and the little purple fish, mouse-fish and sweet urchins too

(*purpura, muriculi, mures, dulces quoque echini*).¹¹

Ennius' poem has an important Greek precedent, the *Life of Luxury* (*Hēdupatheia*), by the fourth-century BCE Sicilian, Archestratus of Gela, which also survives only in fragments preserved in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists*, a fictional conversation between learned banqueters. Archestratus' remarks on sourcing fish are often followed by cleaning, spicing and cooking instructions. He provides different instructions for the same fish from two different places: wrasse from Chalcedon can be served plain, while those from Byzantium need to be highly seasoned in order to make them palatable.¹² If Ennius ever wrote similar instructions, they are not preserved.

It is not clear whether Apuleius was citing disconnected fragments of Ennius' poem or one whole eleven-line section, since these lines of Ennius do not map precisely to Archestratus' poem.¹³ Rather than being a translation, Ennius' poem is inspired by or is a remodelled take on Archestratus' work that has been reimagined in a Roman setting.¹⁴ Ennius' poem was a humorous intellectual distraction for the Roman elite curious about Greek works and interested in enriching their palate.¹⁵ In particular, the locations from which to source each fish species differs in most cases. For example, for *glaucus*, the bluefish Ennius suggests should come from Cumae, Archestratus comments, "I urge you to buy a glaukos-head (*moiaopsōnei glaukou kephalēn*) in Olynthos and Megara."¹⁶ The common feature of the two poems is the assumption that the hypothetical purchaser has access to a wide variety of fish from the entire Mediterranean. Yet, Archestratus almost exclusively mentions fish from Greek settlements, whereas Ennius mentions several places that had not yet been founded or were not under Greek control in Archestratus' time.¹⁷ Some of these differences may have been Ennius' attempt to appeal to a Roman audience, who would have been more familiar with these alternative places.

Gaius Lucilius' satires touch on similar themes. The association of fish with specific locations suggests privileged knowledge about food sourcing. In one fragment, a guest at a dinner party expresses very specific tastes in fish:

[H]e ordered to be dished up and brought to the table what each one wanted. This man's fancy was taken by pig's paps (*sumina*) and a dish of flattened fowls (*altidium lanx*), while the other's was taken by a licker-fish of the Tiber, caught between the two bridges (*pontes Tiberinus duo inter captus catillo*).¹⁸

Macrobius, who records this fragment, explains that Lucilius refers to a "fish of especially good taste (*piscem egregii saporis*) caught between the two bridges".¹⁹ This is a surprising interpretation if we imagine that these two bridges are the Pons Sublicius and the Pons Aemilius in Rome: the *Cloaca Maxima* emptied in between. Perhaps we are to assume that the waters between these bridges are enriched by rainwater draining through the *cloaca*, which makes the fish taste better. Alternatively, Lucilius may be signalling that the diner choosing the licker-fish has an unrefined palate, since later authors often denigrate fish from the Tiber precisely because of the association with the *cloaca*. In a problematic line, Juvenal describes a fish feeding

off waste from the *cloaca* saying, “fish of the Tiber speckled with spots (*glacie aspersus maculis*), enslaved by the shores, fattening itself amid the flowing sewers and used to finding its way into the recesses of the middle of the *Subura*”.²⁰ In the second century CE, Galen refers to the perch of the Tiber as an “inferior river fish”.²¹ An exception to these is found in Pliny and Columella, where the bass (*lupus*) from the Tiber is not disparaged; thus, perhaps Lucilius too intends bass.²² It is not clear in this Lucilian fragment whether we should draw conclusions about the identity or character of each diner on the basis of his order, but it seems in just these few lines that pork, fowl and licker-fish are equally good choices.

Although the selection of the fish and its source was thought to affect its taste, its preparation was equally deserving of attention. In another Lucilian satire, Gallonius, a gluttonous eater, fails to understand this. The Horatian scholiast, commonly known as pseudo-Acro, explains, “a certain Gallonius was an auctioneer who held feasts with rich menu; Lucilius also kicks at him. He even used to put on a show of sturgeon fish (*acipenserem piscem*) at his feasts.”²³ Likewise, in Cicero we read:

“O Publius, O glutton Gallonius, you’re a poor fellow. You’ve never dined well in your life, even when you wasted all you had on that lobster (*squilla*)²⁴ and on that sturgeon, in size a number ten (*acupensere cum decimano*).” ... What does “well” mean? Lucilius will tell us: “with well-cooked and well-seasoned food (*bene cocto et condito*), pleasant conversation, and, if you want to know, willingly”.²⁵

A meal relies on “good taste” of several kinds. Pliny remarks that although the *acupenser* had been a popular food with “the ancients”, by his time, “it is held in no esteem, which I am the more surprised at, it being so very rarely found”.²⁶ Thus, even if sturgeon is an expensive food, as it seems to be in Lucilius, its presence does not make the meal. Rather, the meal is deemed to be a good one when it has both the right preparation of the food and the right guests. Unfortunately, these references to Gallonius’ lack of taste do not explain which are the good seasonings to use, suggesting that the informed audience should already know.

The material evidence, unfortunately, does not provide the same rich detail we find in the textual tradition. Archaeological evidence for the consumption of whole fish in Italy is minimal. Fish bones are very

delicate and do not survive well in some soil conditions, and without the sieving of deposits during excavation, these bones are rarely recovered. Thus, the shells of edible shellfish that preserve well and are highly visible typically represent fish and seafood consumption. Otherwise, images of fish in mosaics and paintings comprise the material evidence for fish consumption (Figure 7.1).²⁷



Figure 7.1 Marine mosaic with more than a dozen species depicted, Populonia, second to first century BCE (Semplici 2008: 116)

Although the textual references to fish suggest an elite appreciation for animals served whole, fish lent itself to many forms of consumption. Fish sauces and relishes were essential to the Roman diet from the earliest times.²⁸ The differences between Latin names for these fish sauces remains muddled; however, it seems that *garum* was a clear liquid sauce like modern Asian sauces, while *allec* and *liquamen* may have been the secondary dregs of *garum* processing. The taste of *garum* would have been similar to modern fish sauce, though perhaps stronger, with its similar *umami* flavour.²⁹

Salsamenta, meanwhile, refers to the mass salting and packing of fish. The earliest textual attestation for salted fish in Latin is from

Plautus, which suggests that it was unpleasantly salty. Comparing women's need for primping to fish seasoning, a girl remarks:

We are thought of in the same way as the pickle of salted fish (*salsa muriatica*) is – without any pleasantness or sweetness (*sine omni lepore et sine suauitate*); unless it is soaked for a long time in a lot of water, it smells bad, and is salt, so that you cannot touch it.³⁰

Although salting fish may have been a common way to preserve and distribute it, as MacKinnon explores in [Chapter 9](#), this passage suggests that steps were taken to make it palatable to the average person. Processed products were ideal for preserving and distributing fish, which were probably also key sources of nutrients (concentrated proteins and amino acid) for the carbohydrate-rich diet of many middling and lower-class people.³¹

Archaeological evidence for fish sauce and fish processing in the Roman Empire is rich; however, in Italy in this early period it is elusive. From at least the second century BCE, amphorae, some with fish remains inside, bear inscriptions labelling their fish contents, which demonstrates that processed fish was packaged and transported in this period in Italy.³² Otherwise, the earliest fish-processing evidence only appears at Pompeii in the first century CE.³³

From surf to turf, we now turn our attention to Roman pork, which has a richer descriptive terminology in Latin than any other meat.³⁴ Varro remarks rhetorically, “who of our people runs a farm without keeping pigs?”³⁵ Pork features prominently in Republican literature and is the meat most frequently mentioned in Plautus.³⁶ Sumptuous language emphasizes the unusually delicious nature of the animal. In *The Brothers Menaechmus*, a young man requests that a meal be prepared for when he returns from the forum, presumably with his mouth watering:³⁷

Some dainties should be purchased at the market;
Piggy of Sweetbread (*glandionidam suillam*), or Bacon,
Son of Ham, (*laridum pernonidam*)
Or pig's head or something like that,
Which when juicy (*madida*) and placed on the table in front of
me, would promote my Appetite to soar immediately.³⁸

Plautus' play with Greek patronymic endings has inspired a series of

creative translations of the passage.³⁹ The comic emphasis on the lineage of the pork makes it more venerable, as if “Piggy” and “Bacon” will be honoured guests at the dinner. The description of the meat as *madida* draws further tangible emphasis to its appetizing qualities – evoking texture as well as taste.⁴⁰

Pliny’s comments about sumptuary legislations also suggests a Roman appreciation of pork. He remarks that since pigs provide the most variety of all meats (with “almost fifty flavours, whereas all other meats have one each”) sumptuary laws attempted to curb pig consumption by prohibiting, “hog’s paunches, sweetbreads, testicles, matrix and cheeks for banquets”.⁴¹ There were a series of sumptuary laws passed over the course of the second and first centuries BCE that Pliny alludes to elsewhere in his text; therefore, this comment about the Roman appreciation of pork may also refer to several centuries before his time. The repeated passing of laws limiting pig consumption suggests their inefficacy in the face of popular tastes.

The archaeological record seems to confirm the impression left by the textual record. By some accounts of zooarchaeological remains, sites in Italy in the earliest period before Roman conquest have a relative balance between the three common domestic mammals (cattle, sheep/goats and pigs). By the imperial period at villa and rural sites, the number of cattle bones drops substantially while there is an increase in the other two species. Urban sites in this period favour pig bones, which account for 40 to 80 per cent of the total faunal assemblage.⁴²

When we look at these remains in a different way, a more nuanced picture of pork consumption emerges. In addition to counting the quantity of bones recovered on excavations in Italy, Michael MacKinnon considers meat weight, the amount of meat each species provides. Because an individual cow usually weighs almost four times as much as an individual pig, meat consumption and preference becomes more complex. Even with the substantially greater proportion of meat that cattle can provide, cattle and sheep/goats “contribute progressively less” over time in Central Italy, while pig increases, accounting for “on average, about half the domestic mammalian meat consumed in Imperial times”.⁴³ Thus, MacKinnon’s data confirm an increased, but not dominant, amount of pork being consumed in Italy, sometime between 500 and 50 BCE.⁴⁴

In the Roman provinces, the presence of pig bones is often used as a marker of “Romanization”: where the quantity of pig bones increases, we can consider Roman influence.⁴⁵ Anthony King suggests

that a “pork-rich diet” began as a Roman preference during the Late Republic in Italy and then was exported by the Roman military throughout the provinces, thereby affecting the composition of local meat consumption in different ways in different regions.⁴⁶ The ease of King’s move between quantitative dominance and “cultural preference”,⁴⁷ while understandable, seems hasty. An increase in the number of pigs slaughtered suggests an increased preference for pork, but why? One reason for choosing pigs over grazing animals during the course of the Republican period in Italy may simply be environmental pragmatism. Rather than grazing on large plots of land or requiring transhumance, pigs can live near humans and feed on scraps of discarded food from human eating activities and small amounts of fodder. Outside the city, they can stay in small forest plots eating acorns.⁴⁸

Central Italy in the second century BCE is an important context for the change in pig farming. The Gracchan land reforms of 133 and 122 BCE called for the redistribution of the public land (*ager publicus*) away from large estates to individual farmers. Both the motivation and the impact of these reforms on the landscape have been the subject of debate.⁴⁹ The archaeological record attests to a shift towards intensifying agricultural production from the third and into the second century BCE.⁵⁰ A combination of increased agricultural production, division of the land surrounding the city and increasing urban density, or at least, increased interest in city living, may simply make pigs a better meat option for the residents of Rome. The same logic would extend to the urbanization of the later Republic in Italian towns. Unfortunately, most Latin texts address pig rearing only in rural locales; there is little mention of pigs in urban spaces.⁵¹ Exceptionally, Plautus mentions pigs feeding on grain at an urban bakery, and Horace mentions a muddy sow running through the streets of Rome.⁵² It may be the case that recipes for pork processing and curing were invented, a penchant for pork was gradually established in Italy and this was then exported to the provinces during the Imperial period as a taste preference to be indulged without regard to local environments.

This brief foray into the animal protein diet of the Italian population reveals much of interest for our understanding of taste. Fish and pork consumption suggest how closely ideas of what tastes good are tied up with environment and with status. The *opson*, or central meat dish, provided a great opportunity to demonstrate social and economic difference. Fish captured from the best waters and

seasoned appropriately assured its excellent taste, demonstrating the resources of host and chef alike. Pork could be processed to create a variety of dishes and flavours and has strong associations with urbanism and Roman identity in both the textual and environmental record. As important as these protein sources were, they could not, as we have seen, carry a meal on their own. The plant-based dishes that accompanied them were just as important, both socially and gastronomically.

“Roman” flora: from staples to seasonings

Snippets of evidence reveal the pervasiveness of non-meat foods in the Roman diet. Looking beyond sources of animal protein, we glean important information about the interconnectedness of taste with the other senses, and gain a better understanding of the various options for flavourings from herbs, spices, fruits and legumes.

According to Pliny, Verrius Flaccus wrote that for the first 300 years of Rome’s history, Romans only ate emmer wheat.⁵³ Though this may reflect more about the sense Augustan authors had about the monotony of the ancient diet,⁵⁴ the statement holds some truth. The importance of grains, and in many cases emmer, is reflected in other sources as well as in the archaeological record. Narratives in Livy and Dionysius about food shortages in early Rome exclusively mention remedying famine with grain, and in particular, they discuss the importation or request of grain from Etruria and Campania.⁵⁵ The author Cassius Hemina, preserved in Pliny, explained that King Numa roasted emmer wheat “since it was more healthy as food when roasted”.⁵⁶ Such accounts from the Regal period and early Roman history preserved in much later authors are echoed by the authors of the middle Republic as well. Plautus’ term, the *multiphagonides*, those who eat mashed *puls* or porridge of emmer, marks the Romans as “porridge-eating barbarians”.⁵⁷ Titus Maccius Plautus’ own name may contain grain-related wordplay. Plautus seems to mean “flat footed”, while Maccius is either related to Maccus, a character from Atellan farce, or a translation of the Greek for a mashed grain and vegetable mix. In this way, Plautus represents himself as a “clod-hopping, mash-eating barbarian, a typically Saturnalian travesty of Roman nomenclature”.⁵⁸

Porridge or mash need not imply dullness – a bland taste and texture. In Cato the Elder’s treatise *On Agriculture*, he details

instructions for preparing thirteen different types of cakes from durum and emmer wheat – several of which contain cheese, honey and bay leaves for flavouring.⁵⁹ One recipe he calls Punic *puls* seems to be an alternative to traditional Roman porridge.⁶⁰ Combining cheese, honey and egg may have created a “rich variant”⁶¹ on the plainer Italian version. Why would a man who insisted *Carthago delenda est* proceed to instruct us on their foreign style of food? Perhaps this was the appropriation of foreign foods for a local audience. As Rome’s political and military reach expanded throughout the Mediterranean, its own traditional tastes could be combined with those of the populations it conquered to produce hybrid flavours and provide variation in the Roman food repertoire. Punic *puls* might be a small reflection of this larger process of Roman self-definition and elaboration.

Although relatively little archaeobotanical research has been undertaken in Roman Italy (most focuses on the Bronze Age or the post-Roman period), we can see trends in the production and consumption of certain grains. In general, emmer, einkorn and barley dominate Italian archaeobotanical samples, followed slightly later in time (increasingly after the first century BCE) by millet and bread wheat.⁶² Hulled wheats like emmer and einkorn required more work to process; the glumes, or husks, of the grains are hard enough to require parching to loosen them.⁶³ This also means that they are “rustic and resistant” both while growing in the field and in storage after the harvest. “Naked” or free-threshing wheats were much easier to process and were available in Italy since the early Iron Age; however, the hardness of hulled wheats is likely part of the reason they were a large part of the grain diet.⁶⁴

The major innovation in grains was in the organization of crop processing during the course of the Iron Age and into the Roman period. Botanical remains suggest that the process of separating the chaff from the grain moved out of the settlement area (close to the home) and to some exterior location, perhaps reflecting a more organized, large-scale harvest.⁶⁵ This archaeological observation supports Nicholas Purcell’s suggestion, based on the textual record, that cereal preparation was a way of “articulating social separation” that marked new “urban” patterns of consumption.⁶⁶

Dietary necessity makes the rustic grains of emmer wheat and *puls* valuable, but as we saw, even Cato’s ascetic tastes were stirred by a desire for seasoning. The spicing up of basic foods appears in a colourful scene in *The Liar*. A cook who is hired to prepare a banquet criticizes how other cooks prepare vegetables covered in seasonings:

They add sorrel, cabbage, beet, and spinach,
On which they put coriander, fennel, garlic and parsley.
They dissolve a pound of asafoetida.
The roguish mustard is grated, which makes
The eyes of the graters shed tears before they have grated it.⁶⁷

The cook's principal criticism in this scene is the serving of vegetables rather than meat and of over-spicing the vegetables to hide their blandness, particularly with potent spices like mustard, which creates unwanted physical reactions. Yet he too expresses a fondness for *condimenta* when the scene continues with another humorous listing of ingredients. We get a series of convoluted terms, which are unique in Latin, when the cook boasts:

Those who eat the food which I have seasoned will live for 200
years.
For when I put into the saucepan cookedender, or onionmeg, or
clownon, or beheadish,
The dishes themselves immediately become warmed.
These are spices for the flocks of Neptune;
The flesh of the earthly animals I season with castoroilapple
or Halfboiledander or allspiceria.⁶⁸

The absurdity of the cook's exceptional herbs contributes to the exoticism of his food preparation. The list of spices appears to include not simply Latin words, nor even Latin transliterations of Greek, but something else completely: a fusion of Greek and perhaps the local Italian Sabine.⁶⁹ *Maccis* (line 832) may relate to mace from South-East Asia creating "an authentic oriental ring".⁷⁰ His reference to the "flocks of Neptune" suggests that different sets of spices were appropriate for fish rather than mammals.

The same cook continues:

For I'll give the guests a banquet which is so flavourful
Today and I'll season it with such pleasant sweetness,
That I'll make anyone who tastes each thing I've seasoned
Nibble off his own fingers.⁷¹

This tangible description of food as "finger-lickin' good", reveals a concerted effort throughout the scene to evoke both the characters' and the audiences' physical response to the description – whether provoking hunger or perhaps disgust.⁷² The emphasis on "pleasant

sweetness” (*suavitas*) creates a contrast between the sharp tastes in the cook’s earlier criticisms and the supposedly subtle perfections of his own seasoning. Although this cook is clearly interested in self-promotion, his comments may still suggest a common value of mild seasoning in Roman cuisine.

Lucilius’ fragments also hint at the potency of certain flavours. One of Lucilius’ books of satire seems to be the story of an inept host serving food in an improper fashion. For example, he speaks of how “the cheese stinks of garlic” (*caesus allium olit*)⁷³ as well as “the poisonous stench of grass-fed goose” (*anseris herbilis virus*).⁷⁴ These descriptions conjure both flavour and smell.⁷⁵ Smell also comes out explicitly several times and is implied in others. The onion, for example, is universally criticized. In a text whose original plot is unknown, Lucilius writes, “the tearful onion and at the same time the weeping onion peels in a row”⁷⁶ and describes, “an onion-eater, bleary-eyed through eating again and again the pungent onion (*acri cepa*)”.⁷⁷ Similarly, in a fragment from Gnaeus Naevius’ comedy *The Circumcised*, an unknown character exclaims: “Well, God damn him – the kitchen gardener who first produced an onion!”⁷⁸ And, “who has one eye streaming because he’s eating an onion”.⁷⁹ Ennius, likewise, emphasizes a character’s dislike of sharp smells and tastes, saying, “he seeks and yearns neither for harsh mustard nor for the weepy onion”.⁸⁰ Interestingly, in each case weeping is connected to eating rather than to cutting an onion, suggesting that onions were being eaten raw.⁸¹ Although these fragments provide little in the way of context, we can understand a keen awareness of the physical effect of both the preparation and consumption of these foods, while also getting a sense of tone – decidedly negative – for these sharp flavours.

The archaeological evidence for onions and garlic in Italy is limited to Herculaneum in the first century CE, where a handful of examples were preserved carbonized in whole cloves.⁸² Mustard seeds are absent from the archaeological record in Italy likely due to a combination of difficulties in preservation, collection and identification.⁸³ In northwestern Europe, where soil conditions have allowed for its preservation, black mustard forms a minor part of a common suite of spices at military, rural and settlement sites of the Roman Imperial period. It was likely produced locally at a small scale.⁸⁴

Otherwise, material evidence in Italy boasts legumes and fruits, both cultivated and wild, which reveal the variety of the diet in pre-Roman and Republican sites. Cherry, rowan berry, damson, sloe,

grape, acorn and hazelnut were systematically collected and processed for consumption in Iron Age Etruria.⁸⁵ Olive, fig, wild strawberry and prune were recovered from Iron Age Rome.⁸⁶ In Pompeii, from the fourth to the second century BCE, fruits including pomegranate, grape, fig, olive, walnut, hazelnut and poppy seeds have been identified.⁸⁷ After the first century BCE, the assemblage is similar with the addition of a few remains of apple, peach, cherry, blackberry, pine nut and almond, all of which were probably acquired locally.⁸⁸ Lentils, peas and chickpeas were important legumes, while fava beans are ubiquitous in sites throughout Italy from the Bronze Age through to the Roman period.⁸⁹ Although the textual evidence of the Republican period tends to focus on the potency of certain sharp flavours and the importance of moderating them when cooking, the archaeological evidence attests to a large variety of flavours – savoury, sweet and tart – available from plants native to the Italian landscape.

Instruments for food preparation

Instruments for preparing food provide the final piece of evidence for food preferences in early Roman Italy and help us understand how ingredients and their flavours may have been combined. Cato suggests the importance of selecting a good ceramic pot when cooking: often it needed to be a brand-new one (*aula nova* and *patina nova*) perhaps because residues from previous meals changed the taste of the food.⁹⁰ These instruments also affect food's texture – moisture, dryness, softness, crispness – linking the sense of touch with taste and influencing the experience of eating.

As we saw in the discussion about grains, the use of mashed food and stews seems to have been quite common. These types of food would require a cooking-pot that has a relatively narrow opening and large belly. The most common cooking-pot in Italy in the Republican period is what archaeologists typically refer to as an *olla* (the Italian term), similar to the Latin, *aula*.⁹¹ It is a closed-form ovoid pot with a flared opening (Figure 7.2). This shape allowed for the boiling or simmering of liquid-based foods with minimal evaporation from the surface of the liquid and thus the retention of moisture. Such vessels are appropriate for preparing stews of vegetables and meat, or grain-based porridges.



Figure 7.2A well-preserved ceramic cooking jar, or *olla*, with blackening on its upper half, Musarna, second century BCE (photo: author)

Cooking with an *olla* was done in several ways. In the Italian Iron Age, similar pots were placed on ceramic cooking stands above wood or charcoal fuel. These mobile stands were ideal for cooking, either inside or out of doors when there was not a fixed inner space for preparing food (Figure 7.3).⁹² In the Republican period, masonry platforms which were used as a stove in one room of the house (an established kitchen, or *culina*), started to become the norm. These

fixtures are common in Italian sites, and although difficult to date, we estimate that they were used from the middle of the second century BCE.⁹³ It is also in this period that a significant amount of evidence for flat masonry stoves is found on the vessels themselves. On its exterior the *olla*'s upper half is typically stained black by soot emitted from the flaming charcoal, but the lower half remains clean, demonstrating how the *olla* was positioned on the stove top with charcoal nestled around its base (Figure 7.2).⁹⁴ Traces of soot in this pattern demonstrate that these vessels were being heated in a controlled fashion with the use of charcoal. Similarly, sooting patterns reveal the frequent use of lids on these types of pots, again suggesting that people were cooking long-boiling or simmering semi-solid foods.⁹⁵

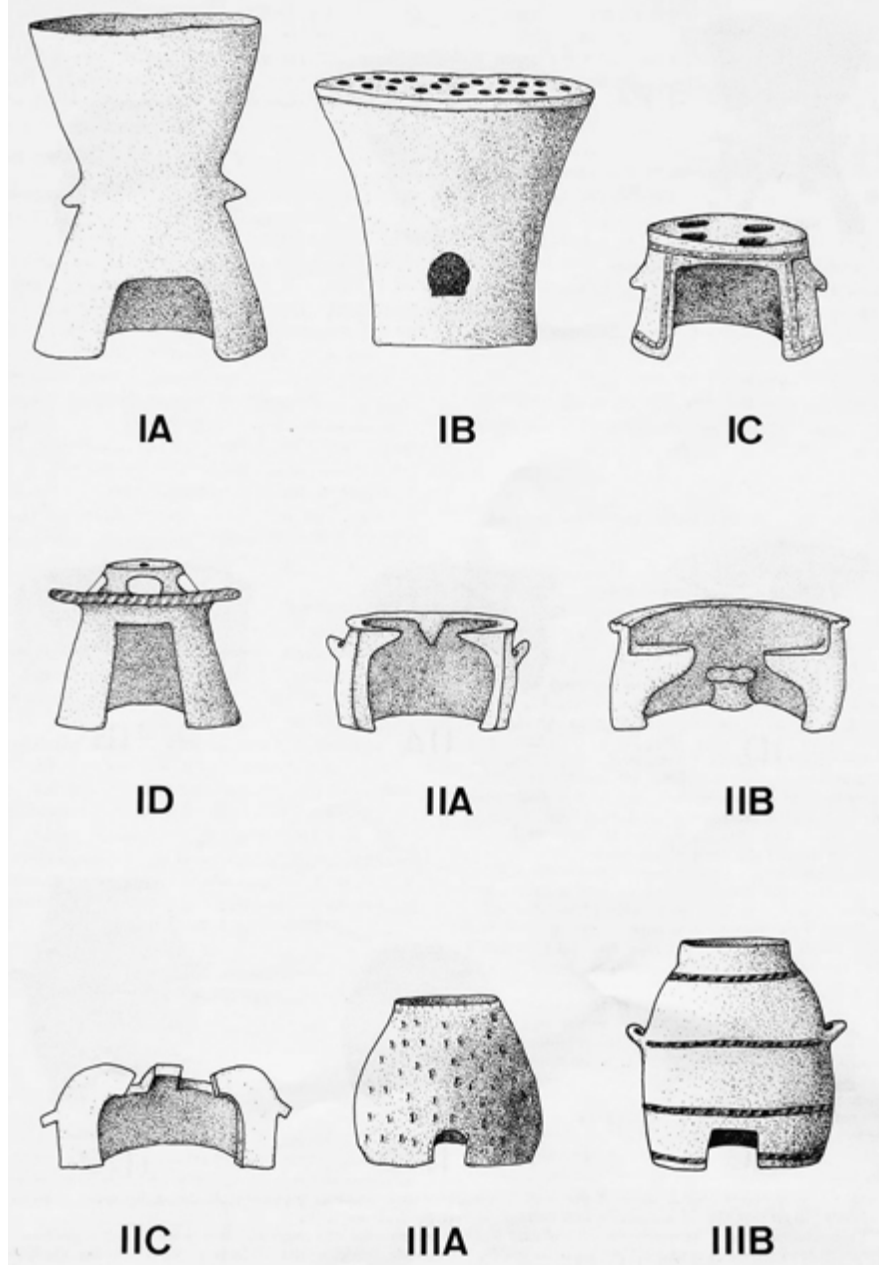


Figure 7.3 Ceramic cooking stands used for cooking with pots over a fire from Italy, fourteenth to second century BCE (Scheffer 1981: fig. 2)

The evidence for metal cooking-pots is mostly limited to sites in the Vesuvian area, in Pompeii, Herculaneum, and extra-urban villas. Metal pots here were abandoned and buried by volcanic debris, rather than being reused and recycled for other purposes, as they probably were in other regions. Metal pots from Vesuvian sites date,

necessarily, to the first century CE, but metal pots must have been used earlier than this. We read, for example, Cato's instructions for making and storing olive oil, where he demands the use of a clay pot, rather than a bronze one, because bronze would leave an unpleasant taste (*male sapiet*).⁹⁶

Unlike in Bronze-Age Greece, in ancient Italy we have no evidence for ceramic grills or “souvlaki trays” preserved.⁹⁷ The grilling of foods seems to have been done either on metal grills, like those at Pompeii, or on spits above metal andirons or fire-dogs, as in early examples preserved in Etruria. Alternately, ceramic pans for roasting, frying, or sautéing could have served for the preparation of flat meats or vegetables. These have a broad flat or slightly concave base and relatively short vertical walls like a modern frying-pan (Figure 7.4). These pans, referred to as *patinae* or *tegami* in the archaeological literature, are quite common in the assemblages of Republican Italy. In one common type, the pan has a thick red slip on its interior, which was impermeable and may have also behaved as a non-stick coating – an ancient Teflon. It is easy to imagine the combination of chopped or filleted foods combined with the legumes and spices mentioned above cooked in these vessels. Without reading Cato's particular demands as reflective of every Roman cook's concerns for his crockery, we can see that the selection of cooking vessels plays a key role in the production of foods and their associated sensory experience, particularly when we consider the texture and temperature of the food.



Figure 7.4 Profile drawing of a ceramic pan for roasting or frying, Populonia, first century BCE (drawing: author)

Conclusion

In the period of Roman expansion, the idea of what “Roman” meant was in development. As part of an attempt to articulate Romanness, preferences for different foods and tastes were expressed frequently in the literature of the period. This textual evidence can be compared and contrasted with the fragmentary material data to create a varied preference for tastes and textures in the Republic. We glean a sense of the prevalence of juicy meats, fishy flavourings, saltiness, sharp tastes and smells, “one-pot” meals, parched grains, fava beans and tart

berries. Through the anxieties expressed by dinner hosts and various characters' criticisms about what or how much someone eats or serves, early Latin authors express expectations for people in their society. Throughout our sources we see the recurring importance of ingredients' *terroir*, their origins, as well as their preparation and seasoning. Interestingly, the archaeological and textual records are largely in agreement concerning the types of food consumed by Romans in this period. What this chapter has revealed, however, is that many foods from the pre-Roman period are actually consistent with what comes to be considered traditionally "Roman" food, suggesting that the supposed "Roman" diet largely reflects the natural dietary resources of Italy. Even changes in some ingredients, like increased pork consumption, might be attributable to changing local environment and settlement conditions in Italy itself. We also see the addition of ingredients associated with Rome's territory as its reach expands, in the form of fish and "foreign"-style dishes. During the Republic, these ingredients are combined and re-elaborated, and emerge as Roman cuisine in the Empire.

- 1 Useful studies addressing many of the ideas in this chapter include Giaraldi (2007); Curtis (1991); Gowers (1993) and MacKinnon (2004).
- 2 Cornell (1995: 380–3).
- 3 Recent engagements with "Romanization" are Versluys (2014); Stek (2014); Terrenato (2008).
- 4 The recognition of this variability has inspired other attempts to label Roman cultural interaction: hybridity (Collingwood (1932)), bricolage (Terrenato (1998)), creolization (van Dommelen & Terrenato (2007)), integration (Keller & Flaig (2007)) and bilingualism (Wallace-Hadrill (2008)).
- 5 Gruen (1992: 283); Fantham (1989: 220 n.2); Feeney (2005: 229–30).
- 6 Barker & Rasmussen (2000: 22–5).
- 7 For biographies, see Conte (1999). On Ennius, see Breed & Rossi (2006); Fitzgerald & Gowers (2007). On Cato, see Reay (2005); Sciarrino (2011). On Lucilius, see Raschke (1987); Gruen (1992: 275–8).
- 8 Jocelyn (1972: 991); Feeney (2005: 239); Sciarrino (2011: 25).
- 9 See Livarda ([Chapter 10](#)) for how archaeobotanical studies help us better understand Roman taste and its spread in the northern provinces at a later date.
- 10 See MacKinnon ([Chapter 9](#)) for an overview of how these remains identify factors involved in the development of Roman taste preferences.
- 11 The Latin is that of Warmington (1935) = Apuleius, *Defence (Apologia)* 39. The Loeb edition *Remains of Old Latin* by E. Warmington (1935–8) is the best complete source for the fragments of Ennius, Lucilius and Naevius, all discussed below. Translations throughout are my own unless otherwise stated.
- 12 Archestratus, fr. 14 Olson & Sens = Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 7.320a–b.
- 13 Olson & Sens (2000: 242) imagine that Apuleius is quoting piecemeal, but elsewhere in his *Defence* Apuleius quotes whole text sections from memory. See May (2010).
- 14 On word play in Ennius' poem, see Banducci (2013: 33–4).

- 15Fucarino (1991: 201). According to Suetonius, *On Grammarians and Rhetoricians* (*De grammaticis et rhetoribus*) 1, Livius Andronicus and Ennius performed their works in private homes and in public. See also Habinek (2005).
- 16Archestratus, fr. 21 Olson & Sens = Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 7.295c.
- 17Archestratus mentions Caria and Pella, which were not Greek cities, but were closely connected to the Greek world in the fourth century BCE, as well as Phoenicia and Syria for wine and fruits (Archestratus, fr. 54, 26, 31, 55, 59 Olson & Sens = Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.29a–d and Archestratus, fr. 60 Olson & Sens = Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 3.101b–e). Ennius mentions Clupea, likely founded at the end of the fourth century BCE, and Surrentum, which was Oscan in the fourth century. See Fucarino (1991).
- 18Lucilius 601–3W.
- 19Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 3.16.17.
- 20Juvenal, *Satires* 5.104–6.
- 21Thompson (1938: 166) and Wilkins (2003: 373).
- 22Xenocrates of Aphrodisias, in the first century CE, refers to fish from the Tiber positively in his *On Seafood* (Περὶ τῆς ἀπὸ Ἐνύδρων τροφῆς) Book 1.9 in Ideler (1841). The taste differences between salt-water and fresh-water fish is made explicit in Varro, *On Agriculture* (*De re rustica*) 3.3.9–10, where salt-water fish are preferred.
- 23Ps.-Acro on Horace, *Satires* 2.2.47, 199W.
- 24Warmington (1938) translates this as “shrimp”. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 2nd edn, s.v. “squilla” cites a crustacean of any kind.
- 25Lucilius 200–7W = Cicero, *On Moral Ends* (*De finibus bonorum et malorum*) 2.24. Gallonius also appears in Horace, *Satires* 2.2.
- 26Pliny, *Natural History* (*Historia naturalis*) 9.27. By 200 CE, acipenser may have recovered its popularity, see Dalby (2003: 312).
- 27Shepherd (1999: 126–8); Mascione (2005: 136). See also Baker ([Chapter 8](#)).
- 28Grainger (2006).
- 29Curtis (2009: 712S).
- 30Plautus, *The Young Carthaginian* (*Poenulus*) 240–4. The Latin text of Plautus’ plays throughout are taken from the Loeb editions of the texts (de Melo 2011a, 2011b and 2012). Cato mentions *hallec* in *On Agriculture* (*De agricultura*) 58. The earliest mention of *garum* is found in Varro, *On the Latin Language* (*De lingua latina*) 9.40.66. A Greek fish sauce existed, but the trade importance and distribution of Roman sauce suggests it was more popular. See Curtis (1991: 13).
- 31Curtis (1991: 22–3). The extent to which such nutrients play a role in the health of a local population is discussed by Baker ([Chapter 8](#)).
- 32Curtis (1991: 86–96); De Grossi Mazzorin (2006: 263–4); Battaifarano & De Grossi Mazzorin (2008: [Table 3.1](#)).
- 33Curtis (1979). For more on Pompeii see Baker ([Chapter 8](#)).
- 34MacKinnon (2001: 649); Purcell (2003: 340).
- 35Varro, *On Agriculture* 2.4.3.
- 36Banducci (2011: 199).
- 37While Gratwick attributes these words to the character Peniculus, the Oxford Classical Texts edition attributes them to Menaechmus I. See Gratwick (1993: 79) versus Lindsay (1922: 424).
- 38Plautus, *The Brothers Menaechmus* (*Menaechmi*) 209–13.
- 39For example, Riley (1912) has “kernels of boars’ neck, or bacon off the gammon”; Gowers (1993: 63) translates “Sir Pigling Sweetbread” and “Lord Hog Temple Swinehead”; and Gratwick (1993: 161) suggests “Miss Piggy Sweetbreadson” and “Master Porky Baconson”.

- 40On the appeal of fatty meat flavours, including pork, see MacKinnon ([Chapter 9](#)).
- 41Pliny, *Natural History* 8.209.
- 42King (1999: fig. 2; Appendix table A). Note, however, that recent work by Trentacoste (2014) emphasizes the prevalence of pork in the Etruscan diet of central and Northern Italy from the sixth to the fourth centuries BCE, despite King's data. Thus, the prevalence of pork within Italian foodways may be more common than previously observed.
- 43MacKinnon (2004: 215). Sheep bones are typically indistinguishable from goat bones.
- 44See MacKinnon ([Chapter 9](#)).
- 45King (1984, 1999, 2001).
- 46King (2001). On the movement of Roman "tastes" throughout the northwestern Roman provinces, see Livarda ([Chapter 10](#)).
- 47King (1999: 171).
- 48MacKinnon (2001: 649); MacKinnon (2004: 152). See also MacKinnon ([Chapter 9](#)).
- 49Richardson (1980) summarizes the problem. Roselaar (2008) suggests that the reforms affected regions of Italy to differing extents. It is unclear, for example, if land redistribution allowed farmers to continue to use *ager publicus* as grazing land. See Tipps (1989).
- 50Morel (1989: 495–8); Terrenato (2001: 21–2).
- 51For example, Varro *On Agriculture* book 2.4; Columella, *On Agriculture (De re rustica)* book 7.
- 52Plautus, *The Captives (Captivi)* 807–8; Horace, *Epistles* 2.2.72–5.
- 53Pliny, *Natural History* 18.62.
- 54Purcell (2003: 330).
- 55Garnsey (1988: 168–81).
- 56Pliny *Natural History* 18.7, in Cornell (2013, 254–5). This is likely a reference to emmer's necessary parching; see more below.
- 57Plautus, *The Young Carthaginian* 54. See also *The Ghost (Mostellaria)* 828 for "pultiphagus barbarus".
- 58Gowers (1993: 54) as suggested by Gratwick (1973). Judith Hallett connects Maccius to the unknown spices in *The Liar (Pseudolus)* 829–36, discussed below. See also Hallett (1993: 23).
- 59Cato, *On Agriculture* 73–86 and 121.
- 60Cato, *On Agriculture* 85.
- 61Dalby (1998: 163 n.193).
- 62On hulled wheats from Iron Age Tarquinia, see Rottoli (1997, 2005); from Rome see Motta (2002, 2011), and Costantini & Giorgi (2001); from Gran Carro di Bolsena, see Costantini & Costantini Biasini (1995: table 1). For hulled and other wheats at Volterra see Motta *et al.* (1993: 113). At Pompeii in the Republican period, see Robinson (1999: 97–100) and Murphy *et al.* (2012). For a review of first-century CE Pompeian remains and how they can help us identify taste preferences, see Baker ([Chapter 8](#)).
- 63Parching means that hulled wheats are more likely to be recovered, since carbonization of seeds and chaff is an important method of preserving botanical remains. See Spurr (1986: 92–3). However, the appearance of hulled wheats across a broad spectrum of sites and deposits in Italy helps mitigate some of this potential sampling bias.
- 64Costantini & Giorgi (2001: 243–46); Giachi *et al.* (2010: 1266). See Totelin ([Chapter 3](#)) for the link between cultivated and rustic flavours.
- 65Robinson (1999: 99–100); Motta (2002: 75–6).
- 66Purcell (2003: 332).

- 67Plautus, *The Liar* 814–18: *indunt coriandrum, feniculum, alium, atrum holus, / apponunt rumicem, brassicam, betam, blitum, / eo laserpici libram pondo diluont, / teritur sinapis scelera, quae illis qui terunt / prius quam triverunt oculi ut extillent facit.*
- 68Plautus, *The Liar* 829–36: *nam vel ducenos annos poterunt vivere / meas qui essitabant escas quas condivero. / nam ego cicilendrum quando in patinas indidi / aut cepolendrum aut maccidem aut secaptidem, / eae ipsae se patinae fervefaciunt ilico. / haec ad Neptuni pecudes condimenta sunt; / terrestres pecudes cicimandro condio aut / hapalopside aut cataractria.*
- 69Gowers (1993: 103–4); Danese (1997: 528–9).
- 70Miller (1998: 9, 58–60). On herbs and spices like cumin, coriander and pepper found throughout the Roman world, see Livarda ([Chapter 10](#)).
- 71Plautus, *The Liar* 880–4: *nam ego ita convivis cenam conditam dabo / hodie atque ita suavi suavitate condiam: / ut quisque quidque conditum gustaverit, / ipsus sibi faciam ut digitos praerodat suos.*
- 72Banducci (2011: 201).
- 73Lucilius 481W.
- 74Lucilius 480W.
- 75See Potter (2015).
- 76Lucilius 216W.
- 77Lucilius 217W.
- 78Naevius 18–19W.
- 79Naevius 20W.
- 80Ennius, *Satires* 12–13W.
- 81On the science of onion and garlic effects, see Block (2010). On these flavours in the Greek popular imagination see Clements (2013).
- 82Meyer (1980: 414–15).
- 83Mustard seeds, part of the *brassicaceae* family, are difficult to distinguish from others of the same family (e.g. cabbage and parsnip) unless preserved very well, according to Laura Motta in a personal communication of 5 December 2013. One fragment of “*brassicaceae* indeterminate” appears at Pompeii. See Robinson (1999: table 14).
- 84Livarda (2008c: 206). See also Livarda ([Chapter 10](#)).
- 85Costantini & Costanini Biasini (1995: 329–30).
- 86Costantini & Giorgi (2001: 244–5); Motta (2002: 73).
- 87Robinson (1999: 97).
- 88Robinson (1999: 99–100); Meyer (1980).
- 89Di Pasquale & Terzani (2006: 286).
- 90Cato, *On Agriculture* 85 and 87.
- 91Olcese (2003). Though many texts in Latin refer to an *aula* we cannot directly connect this form to those references, since ancient authors do not describe what the *aula* looks like and are rarely consistent in their explanation of the vessel’s use. See Donnelly (2015).
- 92Scheffer (1981); Banducci (2015).
- 93For example, at Cosa. See Rabinowitz (2002); Fentress (2003: 17).
- 94Banducci (forthcoming).
- 95On the zooarchaeological markers of boiling and stewing meat, see MacKinnon ([Chapter 9](#)).
- 96Cato, *On Agriculture* 66.
- 97On souvlaki trays see Hruby (2006: 145–6); Lis (2008: 147); Hemingway *et al.* (2011: 526).

Tastes and digestion

Archaeology and medicine in Roman Italy

Patricia Baker

In the fourth or fifth century CE a collection of recipes from unknown writers was compiled under the pseudepigraphical name Apicius. Apicius supposedly lived in the early first century CE and like some of the literary figures discussed in previous chapters, was renowned for his luxurious lifestyle and flamboyant taste in food.¹ Since his name was attributed to this collection, there is an underlying assumption that the recipes, like the character of Apicius, were extravagant and intended for high-status Romans, such as those associated with the imperial family and senatorial class. Yet the preparation for the dishes is generally uncomplicated, and in comparison to the archaeological remains of food from Roman Italy, discussed below, the majority of the ingredients were readily available and likely to have been consumed by people from all classes of Roman society. Consequently, Grocock and Grainger maintain that many of the dishes in the collection were intended for what they term the middle classes, including, for example, builders, shopkeepers and farmers. They also suggest that the recipes might have been taken from popular dishes served in taverns (*popinae*), likely frequented by Romans living in small houses and apartments with little or no space for cooking.² Thus, closer examination of these recipes not only allows us to dispel some of the myths and/or exaggerations of garish Roman eating habits, but also permits us to ascertain what other conceptions the Romans might have had about food and diet.

Interestingly, six of the recipes in the collection recommend dishes for good digestion. One section is labelled “Easily Digested Relish” (*Pulmentarium ad Ventrum*) and includes four optional recipes.³ The first calls for boiled, chopped beets and stored leeks, but could also be prepared with polypody, the root of the oak fern known for its purgative qualities. After the vegetables were arranged in a dish,

pounded pepper and cumin mixed with *liquamen* and *passum*⁴ were poured onto the vegetables so that they were sweet (*ut quaedam dulcedo sit*). This was boiled and then served.⁵ The other recipes that Apicius recommended for good digestion, which will be described below, called for a number of the same ingredients: cumin, salt, *liquamen* and beets, and differ from many other recipes in the collection that call for other herbs and condiments like thyme, oregano and lovage. Their preparation also meant that they shared the same food flavours: sweet and/or salty. The recipes establish that the Romans were mindful of a connection between food and health, particularly in regard to the digestive process. This example also suggests that the Romans believed certain foods had beneficial properties that were recognized by their flavours.⁶ Since this is one writer's opinion, we will examine a range of texts to determine if there was a more widely held medical perception about the perceived relationship between the digestive properties of foods and their flavours. Two questions are therefore addressed in this chapter. First, was the apparent link between the food flavours and their powers suggested by Apicius substantiated by other writers in their food descriptions? Second, in relation to the first question, did Roman medical writers and authors of other genres of literature describe foods that were readily available or ones that were difficult to obtain?

To determine whether the foods mentioned by ancient writers were common or exotic, this chapter compares the food remains found in the archaeological record with literary and technical treatises of the first and second centuries CE. Just as Banducci ([Chapter 7](#)) explored the interplay of material and metaphorical tastes in the developing notion of what it is to be “Roman” in the early Republican period, here I wish to examine the reciprocal nature of flavour in relation to notions of health. As a result of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in August 79 CE, the ancient cities and villas located around the Bay of Naples were covered in mud and ash, creating excellent conditions for archaeological preservation. Included amongst the finds are a variety of preserved food and bodily remains that reveal the common diet and general health of the people who lived in this area. By comparing this evidence with the works of roughly contemporary medical writers such as Celsus (first century CE) and Galen (second century CE), it is possible to see the extent to which their treatises and comments about diet were based on foods that were eaten by most people. In particular, we will explore attitudes towards food and flavour in Galen's *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* (*De alimentorum facultatibus*) and

The Thinning Diet (*De victu attenuante* or *De subtilante dieta*)⁷. Along with these technical medical treatises, other genres of literature mentioning food and diet, particularly Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists*,⁸ are also examined to establish whether the properties of foods were recognized by their flavours beyond the medical sphere.

Health, nutrition and diet in the ancient world

Since one of our concerns in this chapter is to determine the healthful benefits of foods along with their digestive properties, a brief explanation of the Roman notions of health, diet, digestion and nutrition are presented. These four terms are grounded in Roman conceptions of the body that were different to modern/Western medical classifications.

Beginning with the term health, King notes that most of the written information available from the period was concerned with the causes and cures of physical ailments rather than descriptions of health.⁹ It could be argued that the definition can simply be the opposite of descriptions of illness and disease. However, this would overgeneralize the concept. Moreover, Greco-Roman medical works are also largely concerned with daily regimen; it is evident that the state of health in the ancient world was holistic and dependent upon a person's environment, daily habits, age, gender, mental condition, humoral mixture, diet and exercise.¹⁰ Ultimately, someone was healthy if there was balance both within the body and in daily aspects of life. Internally, this also included the idea that the body contained an equal proportion of the four humours and their associated properties: yellow bile (hot and dry), black bile (cold and dry), phlegm (cold and moist) and blood (hot and moist).¹¹ If this balance was disturbed, it was treated with something that contained opposite qualities. For example, if someone had an excess of cold and dry black bile, warm and moist foods and drinks were given to the patient. Moistness would counteract the dryness, and warmth the coldness of the bile. This idea originated in the Hippocratic texts dating to the fifth century BCE, and was refined over time. Eventually, each humour came to be associated with a season, age group and personal temperament. For example, black bile was linked with autumn, adulthood and a melancholic personality.

Besides an internal imbalance, the humoral equilibrium was also affected by external environmental factors and personal habits. These

factors were divided into six entities by Galen, which came to be known as the six non-naturals.¹² These included diet, air quality, sleeping and waking, motion and rest (exercise), emotions and excretion. Ideally someone with a good regimen lived in an area that was free from noxious air, had a well-balanced lifestyle that included adequate exercise, sleep and diet and had a balanced mind and digestive system. These factors also affected people in accordance to their gender and age. For example, Galen's work *On Hygiene* recommends various routines for exercise, bathing, sleeping and eating for people at different stages of their lives: childhood, adulthood and old age, to improve or maintain their state of health and development. The gender division between male and female that became fully apparent at puberty was marked with differences in suggested diets and exercise that would affect the humoral mixture of the male or female body, since according to ancient medical tradition, the male was warmer and drier than the female.¹³

Of the six non-naturals, diet and digestion received significant discussion throughout Galen's work on regimen. He showed that a food's quality could be beneficial for some people and harmful to others because of the way it interacts with an individual's bodily mixture. For example, honey would convert to bile in people with hot bodies and to blood in those with cold bodies. As a food, it also had some bitterness, which could stimulate stomach emptying.¹⁴ Thus, a single food could provide nourishment for one individual, while harming another. Honey also had the power to assist in emptying the body for most individuals regardless of their humoral mixture. Galen's work demonstrates the extent to which ancient physicians considered various factors in both the food and the body when prescribing nutritious diets.¹⁵

Another role the diet played in the ancient medical tradition was to replace nutriments that escaped from the body. The properties of the four humours that made up the human body were also contained in anything that was incorporated into or evacuated from the body.¹⁶ In essence, Galen argued that lost nutriments had the same nature of the particular part of the body from which it had come, such as the liver or stomach. Although food and drink replaced nutriments, they were not believed to contain the exact qualities of each part of the body they replaced. Thus, foods and drinks were converted into the nutritional qualities necessary for health by a process referred to as concoction (*pepsis*) in the stomach.¹⁷ Although concoction, according to Galen, made the nutritional qualities of foods available to the body,

these foods could not be transformed into a humour that differed from their own nature.¹⁸ This meant that a cold, moist food maintained its properties. For example, we see this when Galen describes the cucumber as a cold and moist vegetable. Because the cucumber has these basic humoral properties, it could never be concocted into warm and dry properties. Galen also reports that the cucumber acts as a diuretic, but this effect is limited to those with a physical disposition of a certain kind. He continues that cucumber aids urination and cools and moisturizes those of a bilious nature, but was not advised for those with a phlegmatic constitution, which was cold and moist. Even people who could concoct cucumbers easily were warned not to eat them in excess because a cold, thick humour would build up in their body and eventually cause malignant fevers.¹⁹

Any food or drink that was not fully absorbed and integrated into the body was evacuated from it as urine or excrement. The evacuation process could also be assisted by the properties of the foods themselves, just as the bitterness of honey stimulated the emptying of the stomach. Bitter foods in general, as we will see, helped to cut thick humours and aided in their elimination. Hence, food and drink aided the digestive process in two ways: first, by helping to add nutrition to parts of the body and second, through the purgation of unnecessary humours and waste.

Since foods were required to provide nourishment to various parts of the body, each with its own humoral character, the question arises: how were these properties recognized in food and drink?²⁰ Unlike modern Western understandings of the nutritional properties of food and drink that are determined by chemical analysis for their vitamin, mineral, protein, fat and carbohydrate content, physicians in the ancient world depended on their senses to identify the humoral properties of their foods. According to Galen food powers were recognized by the senses, in particular, taste and smell.²¹ Taste and smell are closely linked, but food flavours are referred to in two ways. First, they may *signify* a food power, in other words, they are a marker for a power that exists in the food. Second, some authors seem to suggest that flavour *was* the power of the food. For example, either sharp, salty and bitter flavours *themselves* had a biting and cutting effect, beneficial for thinning the humours.²²

Definitions of healthy diets and the identification of the powers of foodstuffs are ubiquitous throughout the world, but vary greatly between groups of people, as shown in anthropological studies on food and eating habits.²³ The definitions differ because of socio-

cultural beliefs about the body and its care, food taboos and the practical issue related to the types of foods available to people living in certain areas.²⁴ Organoleptic characteristics, qualities which are perceived through the sense organs such as taste, visual appearance, sound, smell and tactile sensations (like food temperature and texture), are commonly used both to identify the beneficial properties of plants and animals and to determine their nutritional and medicinal values. Sensory experiences, particularly those of taste, are highly subjective, but they are similar enough for one group of people to understand, for the most part, what is being described by another.²⁵ Etkin pointed out that four classic tastes have been recognized in most anthropological studies on food and medicinal remedies: sweet, sour, salt and bitter. Others are described to varying degrees such as astringent, pungent and harsh.²⁶

In some cases there are flavours that are culturally specific, and we in the West do not have precise words to translate the meanings expressed in the descriptor. For example, the Japanese flavour *umami*, as Rudolph discusses in the introduction, roughly translates to delicious savoury taste. Interestingly, a Japanese study of the residue remains found in Pompeiiian *dolia* (storage pots) of *garum*, a popular Roman fish sauce used as a condiment, observed that the sauce had a similar pattern of amino acids and a high content of glutamate that is comparable to *umami*-tasting fish sauces found in southeast Asia and southern Italy today.²⁷ So when the Romans recommended the foodstuffs *garum* or *liquamen* as a flavouring, the words themselves were, perhaps, a specific taste indicator with its own beneficial properties, like *umami*. Indeed, these condiments are mentioned throughout Apicius' recipes, and in some instances the reader is informed that these are sweet or salty.

This overview demonstrates that a balanced diet, in accordance with the humoral system, was fundamental to ancient conceptions of nutrition and digestion that ultimately played a part in an individual's health. Diets were prescribed in relation to an individual's humoral mixture. Foods with specific properties were recommended to assist in balancing the body, and their properties could be recognized by the sense of taste. Yet, to better understand the Roman classification of food, tastes and their powers it is essential to know what was actually eaten, which is evident in the archaeological remains from the Bay of Naples.²⁸

Archaeological and epigraphic evidence of foods from the Bay of Naples

In Pompeii, houses tend to be named after groups of artefacts or paintings found in them. One such house is that of the Fruit Orchard, so called because it has a fresco painting of an orchard (I.11.5). Represented on it are peach or pomegranate, fig, apple, cherry, lemon, pear, plum and quince trees.²⁹ The diversity of fruits would seem to be an idealized depiction of a Roman garden. However, von Stackelberg as well as Horden and Purcell argue that gardens in the Mediterranean were intensively and diversely planted.³⁰ Agricultural treatises from the first centuries BCE and CE recommended planting an assortment of crops. For example, Columella thought a garden should have herbs, onion, leek, cucumber, cabbage, fennel, mint, dill and parsley.³¹ Von Stackelberg contends that this recommendation was likely for those with larger gardens; however, the majority of people would have had smaller ones. Her premise is based on a complaint by Martial about a small parcel of land. In his satire, he grumbles that the plot is so small that he could find more space to grow plants in his window, perhaps implying a window-box.³² Martial mentioned having various plants in this small garden: rue, green pepper, cucumber, mushroom, figs, roses and violets. It is uncertain whether all of these were grown. However, his comments suggest that others may also have had small areas of land, or perhaps even window-boxes, to grow food and flowers. Although the literature alludes to gardens containing a variety of edible plants, the archaeological remains from Pompeii and Herculaneum give a truer impression of what was grown and eaten in Roman Italy.

The types of plants grown at both sites are identified through various archaeological methods: root casts, archaeobotanical studies of soil samples containing pollen, nuts, seeds and small bones, carbonized foods, remnants from cesspits, coprolites, pottery residues, inscriptions as well as skeletal and dental remains. Each of these contributes to our awareness of the common flora and fauna in the region and what was determined to be edible. For a general reference, a full list of edible remains found at both sites is presented in [Table 8.1](#).³³

[Table 8.1](#) Comparison of food remains in the Bay of Naples with Apicius and Galen's *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* (OPF) and *On the Thinning Diet* (OTD)^a

	Food (botanical name)	Inscription number	Pollen, seed or pup	Food remains	Bone shell	Cuprolite	Pot label	Flavour	Ancient source
1	Alfalfa (<i>Medicago sativa</i>)		X						
2	Almond, sweet (<i>Prunus dulcis</i>)		X	X				Sweet	OPF 2.29 (6.611–12 Kuhn) OTD 10*
3	Animal bones (unspecified)				X				
4	Apple (<i>Malus domestica</i>)		X	X				Harsh, Bland, Astringent	OPF 2.21–2 (6.599 Kuhn)* OTD 2*, 10
5	Barley (<i>Hordeum vulgare</i>)		X				CIL IV 5/45–60		OPF 1.10–1.2 (6.504–10 Kuhn) OTD 6
6	Bay (<i>Laurus nobilis</i>)		X				CIL IV 6948		
7	Beetroot (<i>Beta vulgaris</i>)	CIL IV 4888							OPF 2.43 (6.630 Kuhn) OTD 2, 8
8	Blackberry, wild (<i>Rubus ulmifolius</i>)		X					Astringent	OPF 2.13 (6.589 Kuhn)* OTD 3, 10
9	Black-eyed pea (<i>Vigna unguiculata</i>)		X						See peas and fava beans
10	Bread	CIL IV 4868; 5380; 8561		X					See wheat and barley
11	Broad/fava beans (<i>Vicia faba</i> S. <i>Vicia faba</i> var. <i>minor</i>)		X	X					OPF 1.19 (6.592–6.632 Kuhn)
12	Cabbage (<i>Brassica rapa</i>)	CIL IV 4888	X					Salty	OPF 2.44* (6.631–3 Kuhn) OTD 2

	Food (botanical name)	Inscription number	Pollen, seed or pup	Food remains	Bone shell	Cuprolite	Pot label	Flavour	Ancient source
13	Carrot (<i>Daucus carota</i>)		X						OPF 2.33 (6.615 Kuhn)
14	Carpenter's clam (<i>Neoraphe decussata</i>)				X				
15	Celery (<i>Apium graveolens</i>)		X					Bitter	OPF 2.51* (6.657–9 Kuhn) OTD 2
16	Cheese	CIL IV 5380; 8561						Sharp, Sour	OPF 3.14–15 (6.681–99 Kuhn)* OTD 11
17	Cherry, tart (<i>Prunus cerasus</i>)		X	X				Astringent	OPF 2.12 (6.588–9 Kuhn)* OTD 10
18	Chestnut, sweet (<i>Castanea sativa</i>)		X	X					OTD 10
19	Chickpea (<i>Cicer arietinum</i>)		X				CIL IV 5/78–9		OPF 1.22 (6.577–4 Kuhn)
20	Cucumber (<i>Cucumis</i> sp.)		X					Bland/Watery	OPF 2.6 (6.567–9 Kuhn)* OTD 2*
21	Dart (<i>Phaenicia dactyloides</i>)			X					
22	Domestic cow (<i>Bos taurus</i>)				X			Marrows, Sweet	Mean OPF 3.1 (6.661–2 Kuhn) Marrow OPF 3.8 (6.677 Kuhn)*
23	Domestic clam (<i>Donax trunculus</i>)				X			Salty	OPF 3.32 (6.753–5 Kuhn)*
24	Eggs (shell remains)				X				OPF 3.21 (6.705–7 Kuhn)

25	Fennel (<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>)						CIL IV 5/71		OTD 3
26	Fennel (<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>)		X						OPF 1.74 (6.537–8 Kuhn)
27	Fig (<i>Ficus carica</i>)		X	X			CIL IV 2568	Sweet	OPF 2.8 (6.572 Kuhn)* OTD 10
28	Flax (<i>Linum catharticum</i>)		X						OPF 1.32 (6.549 Kuhn)
29	Garlic (<i>Allium sativum</i>)		X				CIL IV 2970	Bitter, Sharp	OPF 2.69 (6.658–9 Kuhn)* OTD 2, 3, 9*
30	Garum							Salty	OTD 3
31	Goat (<i>Capra hircus</i>)				X				Milk/Alcove: OPF 3.14–16 (6.681–99 Kuhn) Mean: OPF 3.1 (6.666 Kuhn)
32	Grape, common (<i>Vitis vinifera</i>)		X	X				Sweet, Sour, Harsh	OPF 2.9–10 (6.578–9 Kuhn)* OTD 10, 11*
33	Hazel (<i>Corylus avellana</i>)		X						OTD 10
34	Honey							Sweet, Slightly Bitter	OTD 3, 11*
35	Juniper (<i>Juniperus</i> sp.)		X					Bitter	OPF 2.15 (6.590 Kuhn)*
36	Lark (<i>Allium ampeloprasum</i>)	CIL IV 5380	X					Bitter	OPF 2.69 (6.658–9 Kuhn)* OTD 2, 8
37	Lentil (<i>Citrus limon</i>)		X	X					OTD 10
38	Lentil (<i>Lens culinaris</i>)		X				CIL IV 6580	Astringent	OPF 1.18 (6.525–8 Kuhn)*

	Food (botanical name)	Inscription number	Folien, seed or pup	Food remains	Bone/ shell	Coprolite	Pol label	Flavour	Ancient source
39	Lupin (<i>Lupinus</i> sp.)						CIL IV 9126	Bitter	OPF 1.23 (6,534–6 Kühn)*
40	Millet, foxtail (<i>Setaria italica</i>)		X						OPF 1.15 (6,523–4 Kühn)
41	Mint (<i>Mentha</i> sp.)	CIL IV 4898							OTD 2
42	Mulberry (<i>Morus</i>)		X			X			OPF 2.11 (6,584–8 Kühn) OTD 2
43	Mustard (<i>Sinapis</i> sp.)	CIL IV 4898	X					Sharp	OTD 2, 6, 11*
44	Myrtle (<i>Myrtus communis</i>)		X					Astringent	OPF 2.18 (6,592 Kühn)* OTD 10
45	Nettle, non-stinging (<i>Pteris aquilina</i>)		X						OPF 2.53 (6,639 Kühn) OTD 3, 10
46	Nettle, stinging (<i>Urtica dioica</i>)		X						OPF 2.53 (6,639 Kühn) OTD 3, 10
47	Olive (<i>Olea europaea</i>)	Oil & Olives, CIL IV 5380	X	X			CIL IV 559814 13752	Astringent	OPF 2.27 (6,608–9 Kühn)*
48	Onion (<i>Allium cepa</i>)	CIL IV 5380, 8361	X					Sharp	OPF 2.69 (6,658–9 Kühn)* OTD 2, 3, 9*
49	Pea (<i>Pisum sativum</i>)		X						OPF 1.21 (6,532 Kühn)
50	Peach (<i>Prunus persica</i>)		X						OPF 2.19 (6,592–3 Kühn) OTD 10
51	Pear (<i>Pyrus communis</i>)		X					Harsh	OPF 2.22 (6,598–601 Kühn)*; 2.24 (6,603–5 Kühn)* OTD 2*, 10*

52	Pepper (<i>Uiper nigra</i>)						CIL IV 5263		OTD 6, 8
53	Peppergrass (<i>Lepidium</i> sp.)		X						OPF 2.54 (6,640 Kühn/Cress) OTD 2
54	Pilgrim's scallop (<i>Pecten jacobaeus</i>)				X				
55	Pistachio (<i>Pistacia</i> sp.)		X					Bitter, Astringent	OPF 2.30 (6,612 Kühn)* OTD 10
56	Polypody (<i>Polypodium</i> sp.)		X						Apinus 5.2.1
57	Pomegranate (<i>Punica granatum</i>)		X					Sweet, Watery, Sour	OPF 2.24 (6,604–5 Kühn)* OTD 10*
58	Poppy (<i>Papaver rhoeas</i>)		X						OPF 1.31 (6,548 Kühn)
59	Purslane, common (<i>Portulaca oleracea</i>)		X						OPF 2.46 (6,634 Kühn)
60	Quince (<i>Cydonia oblonga</i>)		X					Astringent	OPF 2.23 (6,602–3 Kühn)*
61	Rabbit (<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>)				X				OPF 2.1 (6,606 Kühn)
62	Radish (<i>Raphanus</i> sp.)		X						OPF 2.68 (6,656–8 Kühn)
63	Radish, wild (<i>Raphanus raphanistrum</i>)		X						OPF 2.68 (6,656–8 Kühn)
64	Rocket (<i>Eruca</i> sp.)		X						OPF 1.30 (6,639 Kühn); 2.52 (6,517–8 Kühn) OTD 2
65	Rose, French (<i>Rosa gallica</i>)		X					Astringent	OPF 2.14 (6,589–90 Kühn)* (dry roses)
66	Salt	CIL IV 4898							OTD 1, 6

	Food (botanical name)	Inscription number	Folien, seed or pup	Food remains	Bone/ shell	Coprolite	Pol label	Flavour	Ancient source
67	Sea urchin (<i>Paracentrotus lividus</i>)			X	X				OPF 3.37 (6,738 Kühn)
68	Sheep (<i>Ovis aries</i> L.)				X				Milk OPF 3.14 (6,681–99 Kühn)
69	Sheep's sored (<i>Rumex acetosella</i>)		X						OPF 2.47 (6,634–5 Kühn)
70	Vinegar							Sharp	OTD 3, 11* (see also Grape)
71	Walnut (<i>Juglans regia</i>)		X	X				Astringent	OPF 2.28 (6,609–11 Kühn)* OTD 10
72	Wheat, common (<i>Triticum aestivum</i>)		X						OPF 1.2 (6,480–90 Kühn) OTD 6
73	Wheat, durum (<i>Triticum durum</i>)		X						
74	Wheat, einkorn (<i>Triticum monococcum</i>)		X						OPF 1.13 (6,511–22 Kühn)
75	Wheat, emmer (<i>Triticum dicoccum</i>)		X						OPF 1.13 (6,511–22 Kühn)
76	Wild boar or pig (<i>Sus scrofa</i>)				X				OPF 3.1–3 (6,663–8 Kühn), 3.5 (6,669–77 Kühn)
77	Wine (various, see grape)	CIL IV 5380, 8361						Sweet, Harsh, Astringent	OPF 3.19 (6,743–5 Kühn) OTD 6, 11*

^{a*} Indicates that author refers to food flavour in relation to health, digestion or humoral quality.

One of the earliest methods used in archaeological excavations for identifying the layouts of Roman gardens was taking root casts. Making casts of plant roots involves filling the voids left by biological remains in the hardened lava and soil with plaster. Once these are dry, the archaeologist chips away the lava and soil to see the cast. It is most famously used for identifying people, but Jashemski, an archaeologist whose research focused on Roman gardens, used this method to determine garden design and, with varying success, the type of plant that was grown from the shape of its roots. For the most part, the moulds are useful for establishing garden layouts. For example, casts taken at the Inn of Euxinus (I.11.10–11) revealed a vineyard containing at least thirty-two vines planted in irregular rows. Also found in the garden were two large pottery vessels embedded in the ground, suggesting wine production.³⁴ Other fruit-bearing trees were identified throughout the region from the fruits found next to the casts: almond, crab apple, cherry, chestnut, date, fig, olive and possibly a lemon, but more likely a citron (Table 8.1).³⁵ If no carbonized fruits are found with the mould, the root cast method of identification is less reliable than archaeobotanical studies of soil remains, which have become commonly used as a method of flora identification in archaeological science, as Livarda demonstrates in Chapter 10.

Since 1994 the Research Laboratory of the Soprintendenza Archeologica di Pompeii has been examining soil samples from Roman sites in the Bay of Naples, for which a full list of the pollens and carbonized seeds and fruits is given in the appendix of Ciarallo's *Flora Pompeiana*.³⁶ The edible plants (Table 8.1) include grasses (wheats, barley); nuts (hazel, walnuts, chestnuts and almonds); beans, pulses and peas (chickpeas, fava beans, peas and lentils); fruits (apple, mulberry, peach, quince, pear and cherry); vegetables (beets, cucumber, cabbage, leeks, onion, purslane, radish, rocket and fennel); and herbs or spices (garlic, bay and fenugreek). The fruit trees identified in soil samples and Jashemski's study correspond to those found painted on the fresco found in the House of the Fruit Orchard, indicating that it was a realistic representation of the trees grown in the region.

Although small bones and shells are sometimes found in soil studies, most of the evidence for these animals comes from

excavations. Shells and bones were excavated in the garden belonging to the House of the Wedding of Alexander (VI.42), for example. The bones found here were from chicken and birds which could be used for meat and eggs; cow and sheep or goat, which could be for dairy or meat; and pig or wild boar, likely raised or hunted for its meat.³⁷ Included among these were two unspecified fish vertebrae and unspecified shells.³⁸ Throughout both cities, evidence for domestic cow, sheep and/or goats, pigs and/or wild boars and rabbit were found. Along with these were the bones of other animals: domestic horses, cats, dogs, dormice, weasel and voles.³⁹ Although these other animals are edible, they are rarely mentioned as foods in medical texts except when Galen speaks of what other groups of people ate.⁴⁰ For this reason, we will not be looking at them closely. Along with bones, the shells of edible shellfish found in the gardens were small clams, murex, scallops, cockles and sea urchins.⁴¹ Faunal remains of this sort (see [Table 8.1](#)) can help us understand the identity of a population, as we have seen in Banducci's discussion in the [previous chapter](#), but they also help us better understand ancient taste, as MacKinnon explores in the [next chapter](#).

The flora and fauna attest to a variety of available foods, but other sources of evidence provide a better indication of how they were prepared and what was actually ingested. Carbonized bread, buns and nuts were discovered in houses, showing how plants known from pollen samples were either prepared for consumption or, as in the case of carbonized walnuts, eaten after being harvested from the tree. The remains of flourmills and bakeries in both Pompeii and Herculaneum are further evidence for food preparation.⁴² For example, recent excavations under the *Insula Orientalis*, which contained an apartment block/tenement running along the southern side of Cardo V in Herculaneum, confirm what people ate and allow us to see where and how food was prepared. Moreover, it also gives us some insight into the multisensory fabric of the ancient city.⁴³ This excavation revealed a sewer that has no evidence of a flow of water that would have emptied it; thus it was likely a cesspit. This pit was half-full when it was covered by ash, which helped preserve the biological remains that had been discarded. The cesspit was placed under a group of houses in Herculaneum that presumably belonged to workers and shopkeepers, because the *insula* also exhibits remains consistent with a *taberna*, a fuller's and a bakery sited amongst the domestic structures.⁴⁴ Likewise, the toilets belonging to the houses, usually placed next to kitchens, emptied directly into the cesspit. Besides their intended

function, toilets were also convenient for disposing of garbage, such as scraps of food.⁴⁵ The disposed waste is clear evidence for what was ingested and prepared by the people living in the houses above the sewer. The finds include eggshells, pips and seeds, chopped animal bone, seashells, copious fish and bird bones and sea urchin. Charcoal was also found amongst the waste, which also reveals something about the process of cooking and/or heating the inhabitants were using. The bones include those found in Pompeii: domestic fowl, sheep and pig, while the edible molluscs are limpets, Noah's Ark clams, dog cockle, mussel, queen and pilgrim's scallop, murex, thorny oyster, wedge shells and cuttlefish. Small fish bones were recognized as flatfish, haddock/cod, sea bream, Mediterranean anchovy, Mediterranean horse mackerel and drums (Table 8.1).⁴⁶ The coprolites, remnants of human bodily waste, had the remains of fig, grape and mulberry pips and tiny fish bones in them.⁴⁷ In combination, all of the archaeological evidence demonstrates that the Romans in the area had access to and consumed a range of foods. Incidentally, the social level of the people living above the sewer were in the class for which Grocock and Grainger believe Apicius' recipes were intended, and the foods found are consistent with many of the recipes in the collection.

Besides the archaeological evidence for foods, epigraphic remains also inform us about what was available, how foods were prepared and stored and where foods were obtained. At least three inscriptions from Pompeii have foods listed on them. One inscription listed foods under individual days and was found in an atrium with serving counters in it, indicating that it was a tavern.⁴⁸ Next to the food were numbers, which likely indicate the cost of each item. The foods were basic staples such as oil, bread, cheese and wine. A distinction between bread types was made on the inscription. "Bread for slaves" was mentioned three times, "plain bread" was listed twice and "bread" was mentioned six times. It is possible that the difference was based on the grade of flour used in the manufacturing process.⁴⁹

The second inscription was found in the large *palaestra* of Pompeii. It, too, had the same items listed on it: wine, bread, oil and cheese.⁵⁰ The location of the inscription suggests that it was from a market stall. A small landowner or someone living in an apartment was unlikely to have had the facilities to bake bread or make wine, cheese and olive oil. Thus, they would have had to purchase these items. These were likely processed in the area, given the mills and bakeries already mentioned.

An intriguing list of food with a steward or land agent mentioned on it was found as graffito placed on a wall of a room in a dwelling, thought to be a bedroom.⁵¹ Rooms in ancient houses were multi-functional, so the space could have had other purposes; in addition to being a place to sleep it could also have functioned as a workspace or even as a sitting area. Foods might have been sold from the room, because numbers were written next to each entry, again suggesting prices. The numbers next to the items could also indicate that the graffito was a distribution list for those working or living in the household, given that a steward or land agent is mentioned on it. Along with firewood, the foods recorded were bread, cabbage, beetroot, mustard, mint and salt. These foods, as the pollen remains suggest, were probably grown in the area or the garden of the house.

Inscriptions on labelled pottery vessels from Pompeii likewise evince available foodstuffs. Barley (baked and salted), bay, chickpea, dried lees of wine, fennel, figs, honey, lentils, lupines, nuts, olives, pepper and prickly brine were found on the labels.⁵² Most of the items, with the exception of pepper and prickly brine, correspond with the pollen and plant remains. Lupine seems to have been mainly used for animal fodder. The variety found in the pollen samples from Pompeii was the *Lupinus angustifolius* L. (blue lupin), which is used mainly as animal feed today. Galen mentioned that it was unpleasant, difficult to concoct and devoid of any health-giving qualities.⁵³ This possibly explains why it was believed to be more appropriate for animal rather than human consumption. Dried lees of wine were remnants from wine production and might have had other uses such as textile dyes and medicines. Brine was used as a food preservative and as an essential ingredient in the fish sauces *garum* and *liquamen*. Both Pompeii and Herculaneum had a thriving production in these sauces, which were exported throughout the Mediterranean, as we can see by widespread amphora finds at other sites located around the sea.⁵⁴

Although there is ample evidence for a range of available foods, this does not indicate that people regularly maintained a balanced diet. Only the human remains of bones and teeth can show if people habitually ate well or if they were generally undernourished by modern health criteria. The biological anthropologists Bisel and Bisel carried out a biochemical analysis of human bones from the area for magnesium, calcium, phosphorous, zinc, strontium and lead.⁵⁵ The presence of zinc in bones signifies regular consumption of red meat, unleavened bread and unrefined cereal protein, whereas the ratio of

calcium to strontium levels indicates a diet high in vegetables and seafood. The bones from the study sample had high ratios of calcium to strontium and lower levels of zinc. Thus, the biochemical bone analysis, which suggests high consumption of vegetables and seafood, is consistent with the varieties of food remains from the site.

Unfortunately, the surviving teeth did not undergo stable isotope analysis, which is a method of scientific investigation that can indicate the specific nature of an individual's diet. Nonetheless, the teeth in the sample were examined and found to have fewer caries⁵⁶ than expected, showing a diet lacking in sweets. They also had high fluorine levels, possibly because of the minerals in the drinking water.⁵⁷

In combination, the archaeological evidence reveals that diets were, according to modern standards of nutrition, healthy. The diet and foods consisted of vegetables, seafood, grains, fruits and legumes. Essentially the Romans in the area appear to have eaten what is commonly referred to today as a “Mediterranean diet”. Yet, since conceptions of health, diet and food properties in the ancient world were based on the humoral system and viewed quite differently from modern perceptions, we now return to the question raised in the introduction to this chapter, how were foods found in the archaeological record understood by the Romans in terms of their health-giving properties?

Food flavours and health

Seventy-seven foods were identified in the archaeological record, and Galen wrote about sixty-nine of them (Table 8.1). The foods Galen did not refer to were specific classifications of fish and shellfish, which might have been implied when he wrote generally about these foods. In most instances when he described foods, he mentioned their properties and powers. In thirty-one cases of foods found in the archaeological record, Galen described their flavours in relation to their properties and powers. His descriptions correspond with what other writers said about food properties and flavours.

Although the focus of this chapter is on the Roman era, the medical ideas about food properties did not originate with them. Some of the Hippocratic texts, particularly those concerned with regimen, also described the importance of a healthy diet. The Hippocratic writer of *On Regimen* stated that the powers of foods were not easily

distinguishable by their flavours:

Those who have undertaken to treat in general either of sweet, or fat, or salt things, or about the power of any such thing, are mistaken. The same power does not belong to all sweet things, nor to all fat things, nor to all particulars of any other class. For many sweet things are laxative, many binding, many drying and many moistening.⁵⁸

Other medical writers, by contrast, tended to follow some general rules about the relationship between food flavours and the elemental characteristics associated with the humours, as will be shown. However, for these thinkers as for Galen, once ingested, a food could not be transformed to a humour distinct from its own nature.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, before consumption, a food could change and develop different qualities caused by its age or cooking methods. This possibly explains why the writer of *On Regimen* believed that flavours could not be used to determine food powers. This writer pointed out that the properties could change according to cooking methods. The process of boiling and cooling foods destroyed their strengths, this author suggests. Moreover, soaking and boiling salty foods removes their saltiness and mixing sweet things into bitter and sharp foods or mixing oils into astringent ones balances them.⁶⁰ The addition of ingredients to change food powers is seen in Apicius' recipe for "Easily Digested Relish", and in a recipe for cultivated lettuce described by Galen. In this, Galen recommended adding something salty or bitter to lettuce to counteract its cold and moist constitution. These ingredients would also give it the power to stimulate excretion.⁶¹

Age could also change food properties. For example, unripe pears were astringent and binding, and ripe pears were sweet and nutritious.⁶² When the properties of food changed, so did their flavour, indicating a direct relationship between the two. Although space does not allow for an in-depth survey of all medical and food-related literature from the time, a brief survey of Galen, Celsus, Athenaeus and Apicius shows that there was a common conception of food powers and their relationship to specific tastes that contradicts the opinion of the Hippocratic writer of *On Regimen*.

In essence, Roman writers categorized foods according to their abilities to give nutrition to the body and/or aid in digestion.⁶³ For example, Celsus divided foods into three classes: strong, middle and weak. The strongest was the most nutritious and the weakest, the least

nutritious. According to him, weak foods tended to be insipid in flavour and consistency.⁶⁴ He also said that the nutritional powers could be identified if the foods had good or bad juices, stating that the Greeks believed that foods were *euchulos* or *kakochulos*. *Euchulos* can be translated “well-flavoured or “juicy”. In his translation of Celsus, Spencer takes this term to mean “digestible”, which was indicated by sweet flavours. On the other hand, *kakochulos* meant “bad-flavoured” or “bad juice”, as Spencer suggests, “indigestible”.⁶⁵ This latter category included everything acrid, which had flavours that were harsh, sour and salty. In spite of the quality of the juice, both flavours could have healthy or harmful qualities, depending on what the body required.⁶⁶ Furthermore, although all flavours are initially perceived in the mouth, their effects were not limited to the tongue, but were also key components of the digestive process that occurred in the abdomen.

Like Celsus, Galen stated that foodstuffs have an intrinsic pungency, astringency, acidity, bitterness, sweetness, saltiness or harshness.⁶⁷ While Mnesitheus of Athens, a physician who supposedly wrote a treatise on food, was quoted in Athenaeus as saying, “all salt and sweet juices move the bowels. But acid and pungent foods stimulate urine; bitter juices are more diuretic and some loosen bowels and astringent ones check excretion.”⁶⁸ Here we see a common agreement between the writers about the general flavours that effect food classification.

Replacing lost nutriment was vital for good health. According to the Hippocratic writer of *On Regimen*, nutrition made its way to the parts of the body when foodstuff melted and spread warmth through it.⁶⁹ Galen concurred and argued that nutritious foods were heating, filling and sweet.⁷⁰ Sweet foods tended towards thickness. For example, he identified bone marrow, figs, grapes and raisins as sweet, nutritious foods. The fruits were readily available in the Italian peninsula, and it was likely that the marrow came from the bones of the types of animals identified in the archaeological record, such as cattle. Bone marrow, according to Galen, was sweeter, tastier and fattier than brain, and both were nutritious if well concocted. However, it was advised that both be eaten in small amounts otherwise nausea would occur.⁷¹ In the case of figs, Galen warns that they should not be taken with ingredients that would thicken them because this would do harm,⁷² likely because as a sweet food they were naturally thickening and the additional ingredients would cause this property to be in excess. Figs, however, could be taken with bitter

herbs and condiments, like salt and vinegar, to perform a thinning function that was particularly good for the liver and spleen.

The grape received ample attention in ancient literature, particularly for its use in the production of raisins and wine.⁷³ The flavours of both differed depending on the variety of grape from which they were made. Sweet wines and raisins had the potential for being warming and nutritious.⁷⁴ Galen advised that the thick, dark, sweet, red wines were best for the blood. They concocted more in the stomach and easily spread to parts of the body more than wines of other flavours, colours and consistencies. However, since they were thick, they were not beneficial for elimination through urination, which was best helped by thinner wines.⁷⁵

Athenaeus reported the benefits of different types of wines, including those that were sweet. He referenced Praxagoras, who said that the most nutritious wines were made from sweet white and yellow grapes. These smoothed the parts of the body through which they passed, and thickened the humours. They also tended to stay in the hypochondriac region,⁷⁶ which is located in the chest below the breast, so they did not cause headaches. Three other examples are found in Athenaeus that support this idea. First, he described a sweet Arousian wine from Chios as nourishing and laxative.⁷⁷ Second, he quoted Mnesitheus of Athens, who said that dark wine was most favourable for bodily growth.⁷⁸ Third, he noted that the properties of wine should be considered when determining when they should be imbibed. Before dinner, drinking *protropon*, a sweet Lesbian wine, or any diluted sweet, warm wine was recommended because it was good for the stomach.⁷⁹ This was possibly advised because it relaxed the stomach and aided the digestive process by helping to spread warmth and nutrition. In spite of their healthful properties, sweet wines had to be taken in moderation or they would become harmful. Moreover, eating and drinking foods with opposite properties in conjunction with sweet foods would maintain a balanced digestive system.

To counterbalance excessive nourishment, the other role of digestion was to cleanse the body by thinning or cutting the humours and removing waste through urination and excretion. Foods to assist in this process were heating and cutting with powers to melt and reduce thick humours in the body and stomach. The flavour descriptors sharp, bitter and salty were regularly used in conjunction with these effects. Yet each of these flavours had powers that cleansed the body slightly differently.

Recalling Apicius' recipe for good digestion mentioned in the

introduction to this chapter, two flavours were beneficial for this process: sweet and salty. It had been shown that sweet flavours warmed and moved nutriments around the body as part of the digestive process, but salty foods helped to empty it. Interestingly the recipes that Apicius described in his section on good digestion contained many of the same ingredients. All but two of them called for beets.⁸⁰ The other two were for polypody, already described, and green celery. The celery recipe recommended that the vegetable was washed, dried in the sun and then boiled with the head and white part of a leek until the water reached a third of its original volume. The liquid was strained and added to a mixture of pounded pepper, *liquamen* and honey, then poured back over the celery and boiled. The liquid could be served with or without the celery.⁸¹

The beet recipes also recommended using some of the same ingredients. One suggested that the beets be wiped clean but not washed, then bundled together. Soda should be sprinkled in the middle of each bunch. They are then placed in water and cooked. The dish is flavoured with some of the cooking water, *passum* or *caroenum*,⁸² cumin, pepper and a little oil. When it boiled, a mixture of ground cooked polypody, broken nuts and *liquamen* was tipped into it, then the entire dish was placed in a hot container and covered.⁸³ The third suggestion recommended by Apicius was for Varro's beets. In this recipe, the roots of black beets were wiped and cooked in *mulsum*⁸⁴ with a little salt and oil. If cooked in salted water with oil, the liquid could also be used as a drink.⁸⁵ The recurrent food and condiments mentioned in the recipes are beets, leeks, polypody, cumin, oil, pepper, vinegar, honey and *liquamen*, which are warming, salty, bitter and, in the case of *liquamen* and honey, sweet. Honey was an unusual food, as Totelin points out in [Chapter 3](#), because it also had a bitter taste, which gave it a cutting power. Their powers were all deemed useful for cutting excess humours and aiding in purgation. It is notable that, with the exception of cumin and honey, all the foods were identified in the archaeological record, indicating that these authors were commenting upon the beneficial properties of local ingredients.

Beets and leeks, according to Galen, were beneficial for digestion and splenic conditions because of their detergent property that stimulated excretion.⁸⁶ He did not describe the flavour of beets, but classified them with leeks, onions and garlic. These had biting and cutting properties that aided in the thinning diet. Yet in Apicius' recipes, the flavours of beets were altered with ingredients that were

salty, which contributed to their cleansing powers.

The cleansing effect of salt can also be seen in other dishes recommended for digestion in Apicius' cookbook. A salted-fish recipe was suggested for a poor stomach. Its ingredients included cumin, half that of pepper, one peeled clove of garlic, *liquamen* and oil.⁸⁷ In the section on endive and lettuce, a recipe for improving lettuce was also recommended for helping with digestion.

[L]ettuce (serve with) *oxyporium*, with vinegar, and a little *liquamen* for the digestion (*ad digestum*) and to ease wind (*et inflationem*) and to prevent the lettuce from doing harm (*et ne lactucae ledent*): 2 oz. cumin, 1 oz. ginger, 1 oz. green rue, 12 scruples date flesh 1 oz. pepper; 9 oz. honey. Ethiopian, Syrian, or Libyan cumin after you have steeped it in vinegar. When it has dried, mix all the ingredients with the honey. When required mix $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon with the vinegar and a little *liquamen* or take $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon after dinner.⁸⁸

The ingredients in both dishes have warming and cutting powers, which likely enhanced or changed the properties of the foods to which they were added. The lettuce recipe also specifies that a small amount could be taken following a meal, similar to the modern *digestif*. It likely aided the digestive process and prevented a feeling of fullness after the meal was complete.

In comparison to their description in cooking texts, salty flavours were described similarly for their warming effect that helped to move the bowels, in medical texts.⁸⁹ Celsus said that pepper and salt were heating,⁹⁰ and Athenaeus argued that the meat of cockles, mussels and the like were not easily digested because of their salty liquor. If eaten raw, their saltiness would move the bowels. When cooked, they lost most of their salt, but the meat would cause stomach rumbling because of a lack of moisture in the food.⁹¹ Galen, too, said molluscs contained a salty juice that promoted gastric emptying. After removing the juice, the flesh of the animal would become caustic to the stomach.⁹² He also advised putting salt or fish sauce on olives, cabbage, figs and celery to enhance or give them purgative qualities.⁹³ Even wines could be treated with salt to perform the same function, as Athenaeus suggests when one of his interlocutors recommends the addition of seawater to wines.⁹⁴ Although salt could move the bowels, digestion also assisted in cutting bodily humours.

If there was an excess of thick humours in the body, Galen

recommended the thinning diet, which mainly consisted of foods that were heating, sharp and bitter.⁹⁵ As seen, Apicius recommended celery for its digestive properties, and Galen agreed, stating that its bitter quality was particularly useful as a diuretic.⁹⁶ Other bitter foods mentioned by Galen were garlic,⁹⁷ leek, pistachios and radish.⁹⁸ Juniper, which was sharp and heating, was recommended for cleansing the kidneys.⁹⁹ Cheese was considered sharp and would become more so if rennet was added to it. This would cause it to lose moisture, particularly when aged. This was harmful because it enhanced its fiery state and would cause excessive dryness in the body.¹⁰⁰ Thus, these foods also had to be taken in moderation otherwise a bad reaction would occur with the bodily mixture.

In some instances cooling and binding properties were necessary for aiding digestion, particularly for a weak stomach and loose bowels. In these cases astringent and sour foods were recommended. Sour and astringent fruits were not advised for thinning the humours because they were only of use for the fluids in the gut.¹⁰¹ For example, Galen described sour pomegranates as beneficial for stomach ailments.¹⁰² He did not explain why, but perhaps it was because they had cooling, binding powers that constrained the bowels. Other foods with astringent flavours were found in the Bay of Naples: apples help with evacuation;¹⁰³ blackberries cause constipation;¹⁰⁴ cherries, lentils, myrtle and quince strengthen the stomach;¹⁰⁵ and rosehips restrain it.¹⁰⁶ Astringent raisins had stronger qualities than the harsh ones.¹⁰⁷

Foods with cooling and moistening properties were bland and watery, but could, nonetheless do harm. Although they add moisture to parched bodies and act as a diuretic, eating too much of these foods could generate phlegm production. Foods of this sort such as apples, pears, cucumbers and some pomegranates were not supposed to be eaten raw. Galen advised that cooking them would make them less harmful, likely because cooking warmed and dried them.¹⁰⁸ Thus, we see that the foods found by archaeologists were categorized by their flavours and properties that were similar to, if not shared with, bodily humours.

Conclusion

We began by questioning the extent to which Roman medical writers and authors of other literary genres described foods that could be

identified in the archaeological record. As this chapter has shown, a variety of foods were found through different archaeological methods (explored in greater detail by MacKinnon and Livarda in the following chapters), and the Romans in the Bay of Naples regularly consumed a beneficial diet rich in vegetables, legumes and seafood with a lighter consumption of meat. Since a healthy state was better than being ill, the regimen advocated by Roman physicians in the first two centuries CE included easily obtainable foods rather than exotic ingredients. They medicalized the diet by suggesting that foods be eaten in a balanced manner, so that one type was not consumed in excess, creating a humoral imbalance in the body.

We have also explored in a Roman context a larger theme in this volume, namely, how food was classified in antiquity and what the perceived link between food flavours and their powers could be. In relation to ancient medicine and humoral balance, this survey of food descriptions demonstrates that the foods had properties shared with humours – warming, cooling, drying and moistening – that were associated with various flavours. Two other statements made by Galen support the relationship between food flavours and properties. In one he advised that unpleasant food was bad for the digestion,¹⁰⁹ likely meaning that it did not add nutrients to the humours in the way sweet and thick foods did.¹¹⁰ In another he was more specific when he said “[k]eep in mind that what applies to all foodstuffs, bitter sharp foods in a meal give less nutriment to the body; and the bland ones, and more than these sweet foods, give much nutriment; and still more so if they have a compacted substance so that they are neither moist nor porous in composition”.¹¹¹ It seems that the idea of a balanced diet, in the ancient humoral sense, was followed, given that the bones and teeth from the Bay of Naples indicate the foods recommended by the physicians were regularly consumed. Moreover, food writers spoke of the relationship between food powers and flavours and demonstrated how to change or enhance a food’s value.¹¹² Keeping in mind that foods did not come with labels advising nutritional content, the Romans relied on their sense of taste to determine the importance of food in their diet.

¹The gourmand, Apicius, is mentioned in a few ancient sources: Martial, *Epigrams* 3.22, 10.73; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.7a–d, 12.543c. Some recipes attributed to him are described in Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* (*Historia naturalis*) 9.66, 10.133, 19.137. For a further discussion of Apicius’ life see Grocock & Grainger (2006: 54–8). For more information about how ancient physicians and the public understood diet, medicine and health see King (2005); Nutton (2013);

- van der Eijk (2005); on medical recipes see Totelin (2009); for further studies related to diet and health see Craik (1995); King (1995); Nutton (1995). For broader studies on food in the ancient world see Wilkins *et al.* (1995); See also Gowers (Chapter 5) and Banducci (Chapter 7).
- 2Grocock & Grainger (2006: 24–5). See also Garnsey (1999) for a discussion of food and class.
- 3Although not directly related to the discussion in this chapter, see Lejavitzer (2006) for a classification of Apicius' recipes regarding health.
- 4All untranslatable food entries are italicized in the text. *Liquamen* is thought to be a fish sauce that might have had a sweet flavour. *Passum* was a sweet wine derived from raisins, see Grocock & Grainger (2006: 356–7) and Dalby (2003: 250–1).
- 5Apicius 3.2.1.
- 6See Totelin (Chapter 3) for a discussion of flavours and medical remedies.
- 7See Wilkins (2002) for a discussion of the historical context of *The Thinning Diet*. This work does not appear in Kühn's collection of Galenic texts because it came to the West in 1840 (Wilkins 2002: 47).
- 8Athenaeus' work mentions a number of doctors and medical ideas about food and drink, particularly wines and diet. The ideas presented in the text are similar to the ideas found in medical texts. For a discussion of the medical ideas in the text see Flemming (2000).
- 9King (2005: 1–9).
- 10See, e.g., Hippocrates *On Regimen (De diaeta)*; Galen, *On Hygiene (De sanitate tuenda)*. See Bartoš (2015: 12–99) for a review of Hippocratic diatetics.
- 11See Nutton (2013) for a general overview of the system. It was not until Galen that there was standardization in the humoral system. For a discussion of humoral variety in the Hippocratic texts see King (2013).
- 12For discussions of these, see Hankinson (1987) and van't Land (2012).
- 13Wilkins (2015: 59–61).
- 14Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs (De alimentorum facultatibus)* 3.38 (6.740 Kühn). For further discussion of honey see Totelin (Chapter 3).
- 15See Totelin (2009) for ingredients used in medicinal recipes for a comparison with food recipes.
- 16Nutton (2013: 247).
- 17Powell (2003: 15, 23) provides an overview of Galen's description of the digestive process. Galen maintained that the stomach acted like an oven, heating the food and drink that were ingested and transforming them into a fluid (*chymos*). In Greek this process is referred to as *pepsis*, which is often translated to concoction, though sometimes digestion. Outside of medicine it can be translated to cooking and changing by heat. See also Totelin (Chapter 3).
- 18Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.6 (6.568 Kühn).
- 19Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.6 (6.569 Kühn).
- 20For general discussions of diet and food properties in ancient medicine see Craik (1995); King (1995); and Nutton (1995).
- 21See Totelin (Chapter 3) for taste as a medical tool. See also Totelin (2015a), which explains how Greeks and Romans believed noxious smells could cause humoral imbalance and carry disease. If emanating from a person, such smells were symptomatic of illness. Sweet smells, by contrast, indicated health, and pleasant perfumes were used to restore balance.
- 22Galen, *On the Thinning Diet (De subtiliante diaeta)* 3–4.
- 23See, for example, Counihan (1999); Lévi-Strauss (1966).
- 24See, for example, Counihan (1999); Manderson (1986).

- 25Etkin (2006: 30).
- 26Etkin (2006: 31).
- 27Smriga *et al.* (2010).
- 28The archaeological evidence for food remains is limited, which makes the surviving evidence from Pompeii especially important, both for my study and those of Banducci ([Chapter 7](#)) and MacKinnon ([Chapter 9](#)).
- 29von Stackelberg (2009: 43).
- 30Horden & Purcell (2000: 220–1) and von Stackelberg (2009: 43).
- 31Columella, *On Agriculture (De re rustica)*, Book 10.
- 32von Stackelberg (2009: 45); Martial, *Epigrams* 11.18.
- 33Livarda's study in [Chapter 10](#) is an excellent example of how botanical remains can enrich our understanding of ancient taste and its social context. See also Banducci's discussion of Roman identity and its relation to the environmental remains in the [previous chapter](#).
- 34Dimbleby (2002: 185); Jashemski (1993: 51–2). See Boulay ([Chapter 11](#)) on wine analysis and production methods.
- 35Jaskemski (1993: 60, 62, 69, 90, 95, 249, 288, 295, 297, 300). Citrons have a thicker skin and pith than lemons and are very aromatic. Their zest is used for flavourings, much like dried orange or lemon peels. See, for example, Dalby (2003: 88).
- 36Ciarallo (2004: 197–203, 212–56).
- 37See also Banducci ([Chapter 7](#)) and MacKinnon ([Chapter 9](#)) for discussions of animal husbandry and meat consumption in Roman Italy.
- 38Jashemski (1993: 491).
- 39Jashemski (1993: 407).
- 40Galen mentions that other societies ate dog, particularly young, plump castrated ones. In terms of health benefits he says that some physicians held them in high regard: Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 3.1 (6.664–5 Kühn). Of course, Apicius' recipe for dormice (8.9) is well known, but the animal could also have been considered a pest, so it is difficult to determine the extent to which the presence of dormice bones reflect dietary habits.
- 41Jashemski (1993).
- 42Wallace-Hadrill (2011: 276, 1994: 135).
- 43See Koloski-Ostrow (2015a), for example.
- 44Robinson & Rowan (2015: 107).
- 45Koloski-Ostrow (2015a, 2015b: 95); Robinson & Rowan (2015: 113).
- 46Robinson & Rowan (2015: 111).
- 47Wallace-Hadrill (2011: 283–5).
- 48CIL IV 5380, Pompeii, area IX.vii. 24–5; Cooley & Cooley (2004: 163).
- 49See Mayeske (1979); Mayerson (2002). Athenaeus (*Deipnosophists* 3.115c–3.116a) quotes Galen when describing different varieties of wheat, cooking methods and nutritious and digestive properties of various qualities of bread.
- 50CIL IV 8561, area II.vii; Cooley & Cooley (2004: 164).
- 51CIL IV 4888; Cooley & Cooley (2004: 164).
- 52CIL IV 2568, 5598b, 5721–2, 5728–9, 5730, 5731, 5745–60, 5761, 5763, 6048, 6580, 9420, 10288, 10292.
- 53Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 1.24 (6.534–6 Kühn).
- 54See, for example, Marzano (2007); Desse-Berset & Desse (2000); Étienne & Mayet (1998). For *garum* production in Pompeii, see Banducci ([Chapter 7](#)) and Wallace-Hadrill (1994: 135).
- 55Bisel & Bisel (2002: 457–8).
- 56This is the standard anthropological term for cavities.
- 57Bisel & Bisel (2002: 455); Lazer (2009: 172).

- 58Hippocrates, *On Regimen* 2.39 (6.536 Littré).
- 59Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.6 (6.568 Kühn).
- 60Hippocrates, *On Regimen* 2.56 (6.567–9 Littré).
- 61Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.40 (6.624–8 Kühn).
- 62Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.24 (6.603–4 Kühn).
- 63See Paulas ([Chapter 12](#)) and Totelin ([Chapter 3](#)). Wilkins (2015).
- 64Celsus, *On Medicine (De medicinae)* 2.18.1–11.
- 65Celsus, *On Medicine* 2.19.1; Spencer (1971: note a).
- 66Celsus, *On Medicine* 2.20.1–33.6.
- 67Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 1.1 (6.465 Kühn).
- 68Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 3.92b.
- 69Hippocrates, *On Regimen* 2.56.50–60 (6.569–70 Littré).
- 70Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.62 (6.651 Kühn).
- 71Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 3.7–8 (6.677 Kühn).
- 72Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.8 (6.572–3 Kühn).
- 73See Boulay ([Chapter 11](#)) on wine.
- 74Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.10 (6.581–2 Kühn).
- 75Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 3.39 (6.743–5 Kühn).
- 76Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.32d–e.
- 77Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.32f.
- 78Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.32d.
- 79Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 2.45e.
- 80Apicius 3.2.1.
- 81Apicius 3.2.4.
- 82Caroenum may have been a sweet wine (Grocock & Grainger 2006: 334–5).
- 83Apicius 3.2.2.
- 84Mulsum seems to be related to the adjective *mulseus*, which means “sweet as honey”. It might also be related to honey water, known in Greek as hydromel, or it was wine with honey added to it. See Totelin ([Chapter 3](#)) for more on honey in medical contexts and Hitch ([Chapter 1](#)) and Gowers ([Chapter 5](#)) for the metaphors of sweetness and honey. See also Grocock & Grainger (2006: 334–5).
- 85Apicius 3.2.3.
- 86Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.43 (6.630 Kühn).
- 87Apicius 9.10.12.
- 88Apicius 3.18.2.
- 89See, for example, Celsus, *On Medicine* 2.29.2.
- 90Celsus, *On Medicine* 2.27.1.
- 91Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 3.37c–d.
- 92Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 3.32 (6.733–5 Kühn).
- 93Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.8 (6.572 Kühn), 2.27 (6.608–9 Kühn), 2.44 (6.631–3 Kühn), 2.51 (6.637 Kühn).
- 94Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.32d–e.
- 95Galen, *On the Thinning Diet* 9, 11; Cf. Rudolph ([Chapter 2](#)) for similar views among Democritus, Plato and Epicurus.
- 96Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.51 (6.637–9 Kühn).
- 97Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.69 (6.658–9 Kühn).
- 98Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.30 (6.612 Kühn), 2.69 (6.658 Kühn).
- 99Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.15 (6.590 Kühn).
- 100Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.16 (6.696–7 Kühn).
- 101Galen, *On the Thinning Diet* 10.
- 102Galen, *On the Thinning Diet* 4; see Warren ([Chapter 6](#)) for the transformative properties of pomegranates.

- 103Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.22 (6.599 Kühn).
- 104Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.13 (6.589 Kühn).
- 105Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.21 (6.588–9 Kühn), 1.18 (6.525–8 Kühn), 2.18 (6.592 Kühn), 2.23 (6.602–3 Kühn).
- 106Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.14 (6.589–90 Kühn).
- 107Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.10 (6.581–2 Kühn).
- 108Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 22.6 (6.567–9 Kühn), 2.22 (6.598–601 Kühn), 2.24 (6.604–5 Kühn); Galen, *On the Thinning Diet* 2.
- 109Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.51 (6.637–9 Kühn).
- 110Galen, *On Hygiene* 1.13–14 (6.68–72 Kühn), 4.3 (6.241–2 Kühn).
- 111Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 2.62 (6.651 Kühn).
- 112Indeed, such characteristics are also a key component of ancient drink, as Boulay explores in [Chapter 11](#).

Tastes of meat in antiquity

Integrating the textual and zooarchaeological evidence

Michael MacKinnon

Food is clearly integral to biological survival, but as the preceding chapters have made clear, it is also something richly connected with social and cultural life. Baker's study of the correspondence between food availability and medical prescriptions for healthy diet, in the [previous chapter](#), has illustrated one way that food shapes our behaviour. But behaviours, similarly, shape our food choices. Flavours and taste have long been fundamental to humankind's enjoyment of food, and meat arguably assumes a central role in such gastronomic passions.¹ The simple mention of "juicy steak", "savoury barbecued pork" or "roast chicken", among many people today can evoke a sense of anticipation for the enjoyment of tastes that accompany such products. These tastes, in turn, shape cultural behaviours to acquire, season, process, display and consume these foodstuffs. How did meat factor into the lives of the ancient Greeks and Romans? Was its taste important? And how might responses to the taste of meat affect the role and use of animals in ancient societies, as well as the cultural behaviours and belief systems that might underscore consumption of their meat? This chapter seeks to explore the concept of taste as it relates to the production, preservation, preparation, cooking and consumption of meat for Greco-Roman antiquity. It focuses largely upon the Mediterranean context, broadly over the temporal period from about 1000 BCE to about 500 CE. Such a wide temporal framework maximizes both the amount and range of evidence available (be it archaeological, osteological, literary or artistic), while simultaneously offering an expansive geographic and temporal framework upon which to explore patterns.

Before considering the available datasets, it is important to frame how "taste" might factor in the assessment of meat in antiquity.² Taste is multidimensional, and necessarily so when considering foodstuffs,

which elicit an array of both biological and cultural processes.³ At one end, taste, as regards meat, can elicit somatosensory experiences (e.g. how the product feels while being chewed, swallowed or digested; how it arouses the sense of smell in consumption; how it activates taste-buds in the mouth; how flavours and textures factor into this process; how it interacts with biological digestion in making one feel bloated, nourished, satisfied, sickly or otherwise). At the other end, the taste of meat conceptually encompasses various cultural elements (e.g. how notions of cultural preferences or “tastes” affect access to commodities; how humans manipulate taste through husbandry and feeding of livestock, as well as through the seasoning, cooking and presentation of meat products eventually taken from these animals; how meat and its taste become symbolic of a host of cultural messages, as indicators of power, identity, social status, etc.). Biological and cultural processes are omnipresent among human populations, operating in continually interconnected pathways. Consequently, in assessing the “taste” of meat in antiquity, exploration of both avenues, biological and cultural, in all their complexity, is warranted.

Reconstructions of the past rely unmistakably upon the nature of the evidence used. Regarding our understanding of animals in Greek and Roman antiquity, investigation largely draws upon three principal categories of information. First, a number of ancient texts, themselves spanning a variety of forms and functions (e.g. commemorative and dedicatory inscriptions, literary works, didactic manuals, poetry, legal codes) document aspects related to animals. These descriptions include various types of animals encountered and used, details about their care, maintenance and contribution to ancient life, not to mention the dietary resources they supplied, and the different means by which such foodstuffs could be cooked, prepared, consumed or otherwise utilized. A second source of information derives from iconography. Images of animals, as portrayed in Greek and Roman visual culture or art, provide a means of exploring issues such as animal morphology, characterization and physical variation. Finally, archaeological evidence, most notably for this chapter, zooarchaeological data, supplies physical remains of animals and related material, useful for our cultural reconstructions. For example, a piece of excavated bone may reveal information about the species of animal from which it derived and that animal’s age, sex and state of health. Moreover, it may also yield evidence about cultural practices such as butchery, cooking and eating. Archaeological analyses, consequently, can reveal much about the animals themselves, as well

as the cultures that kept, controlled, killed, ate and exploited them.

Among the three categories of evidence listed above, attention in this chapter focuses upon ancient textual and zooarchaeological datasets, since these arguably furnish a more extensive and perhaps clearer record of information regarding animals, meat and taste in Greco-Roman antiquity than surviving visual or artistic remains. Each source, nonetheless, is not without its biases and concerns. Effective use of the ancient textual evidence, for example, requires a thorough understanding of the chronological and social context within which it was produced. Details about the author's intentions, experiences, skills, knowledge, as well as the demands and expectations of the audience, are often essential when contextualizing and assessing the value, role and purpose of such works. Similarly, factors linked to the context of archaeological remains are critical to their reconstructed meaning and purpose. The samples of zooarchaeological materials studied, for example, must be considered in light of sometimes multifaceted and complex natural and cultural conditions, including the agents shaping their deposition, preservation, recovery and ultimate interpretation.⁴ Overall, reliance on either ancient textual or zooarchaeological evidence as a component for wider reconstructions about animals, meat and taste in antiquity carries its strengths and weaknesses, but combining both sources tempers individual concerns and promotes more holistic reconstructions.

Tastes, cultural preferences and meat consumption patterns in antiquity

Having set an agenda for wider interdisciplinary scholarship in an exploration of meat and taste in Greek and Roman antiquity, it becomes essential to situate this area of study within some larger foundation about animal use, in general, among these cultures. Specifically, what broader patterns arise regarding the role of meat in the ancient diet, and what links them with shifts in production and consumption practices involving animals over time and space? Three main questions shape exploration here: (i) what is being consumed? (ii) by whom? and (iii) why?

Zooarchaeological data provide the necessary depth and breadth of scholarship to engage with the first two of these enquiries, namely, what is being consumed and by whom. Mammals, birds and fish typically comprise the bulk of the faunal remains recovered and

identified from ancient sites. There is variation in the proportions of each category, however, depending on aspects such as the type of site and the socioeconomic status and identity of its subsequent occupants (e.g. rural/urban, rich/poor, Greek/Roman, etc.), the time frame of investigation (e.g. domestic fowl tend to be more common among Roman sites than Greek), as well as geographic location (e.g. sites near the coast tend to have higher relative frequencies of fish).⁵ Even if meat comprised only a small part of the popular ancient diet, zooarchaeological data largely highlight the predominance of domestic taxa, and especially domestic livestock (i.e. cattle, sheep/goat and pigs) among the meats more commonly and universally consumed. Although wild game was eaten, it tends to be linked to more elite consumption, at least within the Roman world. Fish, and especially fresh fish, are also generally connected with higher-status diets in antiquity.⁶ Nevertheless, on average, wild game and fish normally account for less than 5 per cent of the bones identified in zooarchaeological assemblages from ancient Greek and Roman sites; in many instances their values are much lower than this baseline. Overall, available faunal data from ancient sites highlight the predominance of domestic mammalian (and to a lesser extent domestic avian) meat, where meat was consumed.

Who specifically ate meat in antiquity? Zooarchaeological and ancient textual evidence provide some clues to decipher patterns. Meat was often considered a status item among many ancient cultures. It was generally costly to produce, and in the days before refrigeration, would not keep unless preserved through salting, smoking or drying – procedures that added further time and expense.⁷ Most people likely did not eat meat often or regularly during antiquity, save perhaps the wealthy. Presumably, for the majority of the population, meat largely factored as part of some religious event or other special occasion, when indeed it was consumed. Nonetheless, although meat remained predominantly a luxury item within the Roman world, available literary and zooarchaeological data suggest it was consumed in greater quantities than among earlier Greek cultures, with a far greater percentage of it arguably deriving from non-ritual contexts.⁸ Expense and availability of meat undoubtedly influenced its role among social classes in antiquity. Dietary diversity and ostentation were important for elite individuals and varying flavours and tastes of meat were one way to augment dietary diversity. Martial notes that elite countrymen had much easier access to wild animals, which could be hunted more readily and cheaply.⁹ Juvenal outlines

the possibility of buying wild game at the market.¹⁰ Numerous literary references allude to the range of exotic foodstuffs available to, and displayed by, the Roman elite. The lavish dining events of Trimalchio, described in Petronius’ *Satyrical*, yield one extreme.

The ancient sources provide fewer clues about the role of meat in the diet of poorer individuals. Cato does not list meat among food rations delivered to slaves and workers at a Roman rural villa, nor is it commonly referred to in relation to the rural poor in general. Still, it does not appear to be totally absent, given the presence of butchered and cooked faunal remains recovered from small-scale, rural sites.¹¹ Overall, it is likely that rural peasants operating a subsistence-level farm fed predominantly on staple cereal crops, supplemented, where possible, with some cheese, very small amounts of meat, and other foodstuffs (such as wild plants, and perhaps some small wild game or birds) that could be gathered at no (or little) extra cost.

The urban poor likely had fewer culinary choices available to them than their rural counterparts. Presumably cheaper varieties of cheese, as well as eggs, were more commonly available and affordable, but meat likely was an infrequent addition. Sausages and other cheap snacks sold in cookshops could be purchased. Lower-rate and ‘bland’ cuts of meat, such as brains, heads, feet and minced products might also have been acquired on occasion.¹² Some urban poorer classes may also have received meat that was left over from animal sacrifices, or was made available to them from government or private distribution schemes, but such provisions were neither regular nor universal.¹³

Trends in meat consumption vary geographically and temporally in antiquity. [Table 9.1](#) provides mean NISP frequency values of cattle, sheep/goats, pigs as recorded across sites among broad geographic regions of the ancient Mediterranean world between generalized “Pre-Roman/Iron Age” and “Roman” temporal periods.¹⁴ Patterns fluctuate, and each region and time frame contains examples where individual sites, for a variety of reasons, may buck overall trends.

Table 9.1 Mean Number of Identified Specimens (NISP) frequency values for cattle, sheep/goats, and pigs across geographic regions for Pre-Roman/Iron Age and Roman temporal periods

Region	Period	Percentage cattle	Percentage sheep/goats	Percentage pigs
Italy	Pre-Roman	28.6	38.6	32.8
	Roman	22.9	31.9	45.2

West (Iberia)	Pre-Roman	33.4	48.2	18.4
	Roman	28.0	48.0	24.0
North (Gaul, Germany, Britain)	Pre-Roman	45.6	28.6	25.8
	Roman	49.8	27.8	22.4
East (Greece and Asia Minor)	Pre-Roman	24.6	57.4	18.0
	Roman	25.0	54.9	20.1
South (North Africa)	Pre-Roman	32.3	45.2	22.5
	Roman	16.2	50.7	33.1

At one level, regional climates and topographies factor in the representation of animal taxa over time and space.¹⁵ Cattle, for example, thrive in European lowlands, a condition that typically accounts for their relatively higher frequencies among ancient sites in northern regions. Drier conditions, coupled with its critical importance as a cereal-producing zone – an agricultural scheme in which cattle would compete directly with available arable land – combined to limit or restrict many large-scale cattle herding ventures in Mediterranean areas. Sheep are better suited to North African and Near Eastern scrublands, an environmental compatibility that no doubt favoured their exploitation in those areas. Nevertheless, while environments certainly affect animal ecologies, it is important to recognize that husbandry patterns and human diets are not determined exclusively by such agents; cultures shape these too.

Such interactions of nature and culture register well with regard to pigs during Roman times. Pork was the meat of choice for Romans in many areas; arguments may be made that its taste, or at least its dietary contribution, remained popular and helped connect, bind or otherwise shape identities and social networks. Nevertheless, exploitation and promotion of dietary pork varied across regions and among cultural groups during Roman antiquity.¹⁶ While increased pork consumption often coincided with what might be categorized as “Romanization” (however problematic or murky such a concept might be),¹⁷ throughout the Empire, regional and temporal variation existed to such an extent that no strict universal pattern for pig exploitation is evident. In regions such as southern Iberia, Italy, coastal North Africa and southern Gaul, the increase in the frequency of pigs during Roman

times is often sizeable. In the north, only sites of strong Mediterranean orientation display the pattern, for example the sites of Amiens, Bordeaux and Senlis (in northern Gaul); Silchester (in Britain); Nijmegen (in the Netherlands). Typically, these were urban and military centres in northern regions, where Roman citizens, wealth and Roman dietary preferences, such as pork consumption, were likely to predominate.¹⁸

The pork-rich diet of Rome was often emulated within high-status, Romanized provincial sites, especially urban ones.¹⁹ The case of Carthage, Tunisia, exemplifies how dramatic such an effect may be. Pig NISP frequency values between Punic and Roman Carthage double from 18.9 per cent to 38.5 per cent, the highest net increase for North Africa.²⁰ Husbandry schemes and tastes changed, as pig breeders displaced pastoral herders and grain farmers in and around Carthage to satisfy urban pork demands. Similar developments occur among the broader Roman Mediterranean region as well. Augmented pig breeding in various places, where possible and profitable, can modify animal and agricultural husbandry regimes, and the pull of ancient cities, with their larger, concentrated populations, often acts to entice greater meat consumption among urban residents. Ancient urban centres arguably appear to develop a more concentrated taste for meat, with markets following suit and adapting to supply such resources.²¹

The Roman military also affected dietary change, but again in varying ways.²² While sheep and goat bones typically dominate zooarchaeological assemblages across all types of Roman sites (e.g. military, urban, settlement, rural) in the eastern regions of the Empire, and remains of cattle factor more commonly among sites in northern provinces, military sites across the Empire generally register relatively more pig bones than their local non-military counterparts, suggesting perhaps some overall army preference for pork, where it could be supplied.²³ Nevertheless, environmental limitations restricted levels of pigs in some areas. Predominantly, this is not so much a factor of reduced cultural preference or desire for pork by the military in these regions, but rather a circumstance of drier conditions and scrubrier landscapes in some eastern and southern regions of the Roman Mediterranean, where environment and climate restrict pig production. Consequently, the frequency of pigs, as a consequence of Roman presence and influence, among eastern Romanized sites never increases as dramatically as it does in western regions. Taste for pork during Roman times, therefore, involves complex interweaving of

numerous factors, including identity, location, environment, wealth and convenience. Thus, we see a strong interconnection between these biological and environmental factors and the cultural processes involved in the physical raising, breeding and husbandry of pigs. In addition, the social and cultural factors that influence the scale, locale, pattern and character of such operations highlight how taste itself is a constant, multidimensional concept as regards meat in antiquity.

While zooarchaeology provides a good basis from which to explore types of animals eaten, and how patterns changed over time and space, questions regarding why meat was consumed in antiquity are less easy to answer. Scholarly discussion about this issue abounds, the basic tenets of which can only briefly be outlined here. Explanations for why meat was consumed in antiquity generally engage two main concepts.²⁴ On one hand, meat consumption might factor in exceptional or occasional instances of consumption, notably linked to some religious sacrifice, ceremony or feast.²⁵ On the other, consumption of meat might be situated within arguably more secular or commonplace practices, such as the purchase of foodstuffs at bars or *tabernae*. The boundary between these two limits is uncertain, if indeed a division is warranted at all. Anthropological research often highlights the social nature of meat consumption: how it acts to connect people, often during what might be deemed “special” occasions.²⁶ Research into the topic of meat consumption in classical Greek antiquity has traditionally promoted such a message, notably in arguments drawn from literary, epigraphic and iconographic evidence that suggests a rarity of meat in the diet, save that which came from sacrificed victims consumed at various festivals.²⁷ Zooarchaeological evidence is challenging this strict principle, in registering patterns such as higher frequencies of pig bones than might be expected from “ritual” accounts, as well as oddities and inconsistencies in depositional nature, body-part representation, age profiles and species contributions that do not fit neatly within an exclusively “ritual” analysis of faunal assemblages from ancient Greek sites.²⁸ Similarly, distinctions between “sacred” and “secular” components framing meat consumption in Roman antiquity increasingly blur when larger pools of evidence, including zooarchaeological data, are considered.²⁹ Any generalized or simplified overarching explanation about why meat was eaten in antiquity seems, at this stage, futile. To put it simply, arguments strictly advocating solely “sacred” or “secular” reasoning behind meat consumption for either the Greek or Roman worlds neglect to address the multiple complexities, variations and

ambiguities that more realistically underscored this practice.

Consumption of meat in antiquity clearly carried varying social and cultural messages that might shift, change and develop over time and place. Identifying oneself as “Roman”, for example, may have prompted some desire to add more pork to one’s menu. Elites may have chosen to consume more meat than non-elites, and had greater access to such resources. Nonetheless, while access to, or preference for different kinds of animals and their resources provides one means of exploring how “tastes” for meat were patterned in antiquity, it raises the question how the ancient Greeks and Romans may have sought to modify the literal taste of meat itself in conveying and expressing cultural messages. The taste of meat in this sense is as much a matter of how it feels in the mouth as it is of the flavour in the meat. This taste is contingent on a variety of factors, such as the type and cut of animal tissue being consumed, the fat content within that piece of meat, pretreatment of the meat (e.g. brining, smoking, marinating), method of cooking and, of course, the myriad ways in which meat can be seasoned. Each of these aspects was important in shaping and developing tastes among meats in antiquity.

Fat and the taste of meat

The anthropologist Marvin Harris has remarked: “much of the nearly worldwide hunger for meat is really a craving for fatty meat”.³⁰ Fat is a source of energy that is stored in animal muscle tissue (i.e. meat). Most of the flavour-carrying, or aroma, molecules contained within meat dissolve in the fat, so in large part “fat” denotes “taste”. Broadly, fat contributes to that general savoury flavour one might attribute to meat, but it also evokes particular experiences linked to mouth-feel and mastication, as one bites through tenderized, fat-riddled meats or even whole pieces of fat. Fat content varies among animals, and within each animal by body part. More active muscles contain less fat, which is why cuts of meat from areas around the ribs and loins tend to be the fattiest.³¹ Age also plays a role. While the meat of younger animals is more tender, since their muscles are less developed, generally older animals are fattier as their bodies have had a greater chance to build up fat reserves within tissues.

Much gastronomic attention in antiquity centres upon fat and its association with meat. Various cultural preferences and initiatives register in this respect, encompassing not simply the desire to breed,

or often prioritize, fatty animals and meat cuts for consumption, but also the incentive to maintain, enhance or add fat while cooking and processing the animals. The ancient sources contain numerous references to a cultural fascination with fat. Available evidence from Greek antiquity situates fat as a central component in sacrifice. Mythical accounts of Prometheus' trick against Zeus, wherein the god chose the bundle of bones wrapped in glistening fat as opposed to the meatier sections of beef hidden inside a less-appealing encasement fashioned from the animal's stomach, set the precedent for future sacrifices.³² Typically, when we hear of meat being eaten in Greek antiquity, it is linked to ritual contexts, principally as portions distributed at sacrifices.³³ Nonetheless, scattered references to fat meat, in a general dietary sense (which need not dissociate them from sacrificial settings), do register among other contexts in the Greek world. For example, the character Agorakritos, in Aristophanes' comedy *The Knights*, is a sausage-seller, who would most likely include fat as a component in his sausage mixtures, to enhance the products' succulence and flavour. Athenaeus mentions fattened animals on a number of occasions within the context of dining,³⁴ while ingestion or abstention from fat and fatty meat is variously prescribed in the Hippocratic texts in the treatment of different types of diseases or afflictions.

Literary evidence from the Roman world connects fat more directly within relatively more commonplace contexts. Columella recommends castrating male pigs at six months, so they might grow fat;³⁵ Pliny provides advice on how to fatten poultry;³⁶ culinary references in Apicius' cookbook advocate preference for fatty cuts of meat, not to mention numerous means by which to cook or flavour foodstuffs with fat. Adjectives such as "fat", "fattened" and "swelled" are often used in describing animals in ancient comedic and satirical literature, with multiple mentions, particularly in the writings of Macrobius, Persius, Horace and Petronius.³⁷ Ham, lard and grease are among the more expensive consumable animal products listed in Diocletian's Price Edict of 301 CE; pork was also costly among meats.³⁸ Fattened poultry birds sold for double the price of unfattened equivalents.³⁹ Clearly, when it came to Roman dietary meat, fat was preferred over lean,⁴⁰ and pigs exemplified the pinnacle of fatty, and fat-producing, animals.

Zooarchaeological data largely confirm this cultural preference for fatty animals and cuts of meat in three ways. First, the predominance of pigs among many sites suggests some selection for these taxa. Their higher incidence among Roman sites, in particular, especially within

the Mediterranean region, coincides with what appears to be broader, more popular (and perhaps more secularized) engagement of meat in the diet. Pig was the meat of choice, since the animal tends towards tenderer and fattier tissues within its body. Pigs represented good value for meat, and tasty meat as well.⁴¹

Second, skeletal part data among zooarchaeological assemblages, at least from Roman sites in Italy, reveal a bias wherein bones associated with fattier areas of the skeleton, or what might be termed “primary cuts” of meat (i.e. sections surrounding the ribs, vertebrae, shoulder and pelvis area; bacon, a naturally fatty cut, derives from this zone as well), register with greater frequency among urban sites and in more elite settings.⁴² The impression is that augmented demand, shaped here by greater volume and costs, created differential social access to higher-grade (i.e. fattier and more tender) cuts of meat. Cities drew in more animals for consumption, and the greater proportion of remains related to the more succulent types and cuts of meat suggests a preference for them.

Finally, available zooarchaeological data reveal a general increase in size registers across all livestock taxa throughout antiquity. This implies some morphological manipulation and selective breeding of animals, at least for Imperial central Italy. Moreover, these data suggest urban areas received bigger pigs, on average, than those consumed at rural sites.⁴³ Moreover, evidence helps confirm the existence and promotion of a second, larger variety of pig at this time: a smoother-skinned, fat-bellied and shorter-legged type.⁴⁴ This “breed”, alluded to among ancient sources and shown in some depictions, more likely aligns with a stall-fed type that could be fattened easily within such a controlled environment. However, during antiquity, it is not only pigs that undergo breed manipulation for the exploitation of meat and fat; types of cattle and sheep also experience variable morphological and metrical transformations through localized cultural and environmental selective pressures. Regarding cattle, many such changes might be linked with a need for stronger, powerful traction animals,⁴⁵ but this does not preclude manipulation for larger, meat-producing animals by default in such ventures.

While fat arguably held some gastronomic prominence among the ancients, this was not the only means by which taste in meat was socially and culturally conscribed. Such tastes can also be affected by an animal’s diet,⁴⁶ a notion not unknown in antiquity. Varro and Pliny comment on the way pork acquired different flavours depending on

what the pig ingested.⁴⁷ Pigs can feed on practically anything, but oak woodlands ample in acorns are frequently the preferred feeding grounds.⁴⁸ Horace, in particular, praises the superior taste of an Umbrian boar fed on acorns compared to a similar animal from the Laurentine region that was “tasteless” after being raised on sedges and reeds.⁴⁹ The ancient sources encourage acorn feeding during late autumn and early winter, at which time animals could be fattened quickly and then subsequently slaughtered to provide resources over the winter.⁵⁰ Similar methods are used today to fatten pigs; an eighteen-month hog can more than double its weight during three autumn months of acorn-feeding.⁵¹

Zooarchaeological evidence supports the literary evidence regarding the great effort and attention paid to taste manipulation in antiquity. First, most recorded pig deaths fall within the one-to-three-year range, at a time when the animal can attain its maximum weight and has undergone at least one season of autumn fattening. However, it is not just these adults at maximum weight that were slaughtered during antiquity. Zooarchaeological evidence also registers a relatively high frequency of slaughtered younger piglets. Compared to cattle or sheep and goats, which can supply secondary resources such as wool or hair, milk and traction as adults, one might expect more piglets (which provide no such alternatives) to be preferentially killed for their meat. The taste of sucklings would certainly be an enticement, since younger animals tend to have less developed (i.e. more tender) muscle tissues, and pigs especially so. But with pigs there is further incentive, since sows can conceive twice a year, essentially doubling the litters that could be fattened quickly, sold to market and consumed by humans. Columella, Palladius and Pliny all remark on such “factory-like” schemes to promote piglet production in the Roman era.⁵²

References to feeding regimes among other livestock further attest to the ancient understanding of the interplay between proper animal diet, meat development and taste. Columella devotes keen attention to cattle diets, stressing the importance of lush green fodder, especially legumes, as well as quality pasture.⁵³ Fruits, beech-mast, acorns, dregs from wine-pressing, green foliage, fish and salt are also recorded as foodstuffs that can be fed to cattle, and which might inevitably affect the taste of their meat.⁵⁴ Similar attention registers with sheep and goat diets. The poet Virgil, for example, singles out fat sheep, in particular, as animals requiring especially proper feed. This presumably reflects the value and taste of the meat from these

Preservation and pretreatment of meat for taste

Pretreating meats through brining, drying, smoking or marinating also affects their taste.⁵⁶ Moreover, in the absence of refrigeration, some methods of pretreatment also preserve or otherwise coat the meat to prevent putrefaction. Brining adds both moisture and flavour. Salt infiltrates the meat and dissolves some of the fibrous proteins within it, which in turn promotes uptake of water and fluids into the tissues.⁵⁷ Drying and smoking help preserve meat by removing its moisture; smoking is particularly advantageous because smoke contains a number of disinfectants, not to mention the flavour it imparts to the meat.⁵⁸ Marinades are typically composed of three compounds: acids (such as vinegar), oils and herbs. Typically, the acids penetrate into the surface of the meat, breaking down the proteins and allowing the flavours of the marinade to seep in.

Fresh, untreated meat is most tender if cooked and eaten before the onset of rigor mortis, typically before twelve hours after death.⁵⁹ Although efforts were probably taken to consume animals within a few days after slaughter,⁶⁰ various forms of preservation were also practised, as required, during antiquity. References to dried and/or smoked meat occur periodically within the ancient texts,⁶¹ but are far less numerous than those for salted meat.⁶² Nevertheless, methods might be combined to draw out different tastes; for example, Cato writes of smoking meat, but only after it had already been preserved though salting.⁶³ Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 8.647–50) illustrates a case where the taste of smoked meat is “tamed” through immersion in water.

furca levat ille bicorni
sordida terga suis nigro pendentia tigno
servatoque diu resecat de tergore partem
exiguam sectamque domat ferventibus undis.

He [Philemon] lifts down with a two-pronged stick
The grubby chine [pork loin] hanging from a blackened beam,
cuts a tiny piece from the long-kept chine,
and tames the piece in the boiling water.⁶⁴

Domat (to tame) provides a special metaphor for the transformation of

the taste of meat through cooking/boiling. Immersion in hot liquid does double duty here, de-intensifying the strong smoky taste of the meat, while simultaneously rejuvenating the cut, making it more tender and palatable. Thus, we see that a combination of cooking and preservation methods, which affect the taste, may be used in meat preparation.

Concerning the actual methods themselves, explicit details concerning the equipment and procedures required for drying and smoking meat during antiquity are scant, although such operations might be easily accomplished with basic hooks, racks and a source of air or smoke. Depictions of racks, hooks and hanging carcasses or meat cuts do appear occasionally in ancient art, presumably a reflection of actual practice, although it is difficult to determine exactly where, and on what scale this operated.⁶⁵ Indoor smoking would probably require a room, appropriately ventilated, where an oven or hearth could be constructed. Its scale may be small or large, and its setting domestic or commercial, in this respect, depending upon space, demand and resources, among other particulars.⁶⁶ A sufficient source of fuel probably acted as an integral component for smoking, a factor that may have limited its practice in woodland-poor regions of the ancient world.

Procedures for salting meat, by contrast, are better outlined in the ancient sources, by a variety of authors, including Columella, Cato, Macrobius and Apicius.⁶⁷ Methods such as pressing strips of meat and salt between boards, layering meat and salt inside large tubs, jars or pots, as well as soaking pieces in brine solutions, are outlined by these authors. Such practices are, of course, still in use today, not only for beef and pork, but also for fish.⁶⁸

Marinade-type mixtures might also be employed in meat preservation. Apicius provides a procedure for pickling meats, through some ratio of salt and vinegar.⁶⁹ Meat may, alternatively, be coated with honey for preservation, although this method appears to be less commonly practised than salting or smoking, and carries the added annoyance of attracting insects to the sweet coating. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that a sweet taste to meat could easily be achieved by adding honey during cooking, or in some sauce for the meat, practices routinely proposed among the culinary recipes of Apicius.

Zooarchaeological evidence to support or augment our understanding of meat preservation methods in antiquity is sparse. Examples of pierced scapula (i.e. shoulder blade) bones from pigs and

cattle are recorded, perhaps suggestive of hanging sections of meat for smoking or drying,⁷⁰ but this is not an exclusive method. Indeed, it seems probable that filleted strips of meat were preserved more often than sections with the bone still attached. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to determine how much meat was filleted from the bone on the basis of zooarchaeological data alone, given that the procedure may leave few, if any, traces on the bones themselves, especially among skilled butchers who are adept at not nicking the bones during such practices.⁷¹ Among other remains, a somewhat peculiar placement of an oven among some archaeological sites, such as that located within a doorway between two non-residential rooms, filled with faunal trash, at the late Roman Italian site of San Giovanni di Ruoti may link to smoking meat, but this connection is not firm.⁷²

Although various options were available in antiquity to preserve meat, given its representational bias in the sources it is likely that salting predominated. Several reasons promote this. First, the process is relatively easy, and potentially less dangerous, especially in relation to smoking meat, where hazards of fire and smoke inhalation may ensue if done improperly. Second, one can conduct salting in relatively large or small batches conceivably more effectively than many of the other techniques, making it a flexible option. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, salting can help disguise any rot or decay in the meat,⁷³ and thus help extend its “shelf-life”, while at the same time acting as a tempting flavouring that registers as a distinctive, perhaps addictive, taste on the tongue.⁷⁴ We need look no further than our contemporary consumption patterns for comparison, where a penchant for salty foodstuffs is apparent among many cultures.⁷⁵

Cooking techniques and the taste of meat

Most of meat’s flavours develop once cooked. “Browning” the surface, typically through grilling, roasting or frying, creates what is called the Maillard reaction, wherein the denatured proteins in the meat recombine with the sugars present and render the typically “meaty” flavour and aroma.⁷⁶ Fat further adds to the flavour through the cooking process; it melts and lubricates the muscle fibres when heated, making the cuts juicier and more tender. Moistness in the tissue is a delicate balance, however. The longer meat is cooked, the more liquid is lost and the tougher it becomes.

The ancient Greeks and Romans cooked meat in five basic ways:

boiling or stewing, roasting, frying, grilling and baking (as in a casserole). A survey of incidence of such techniques within the ancient sources indicates predominance for boiling or stewing and roasting. Apicius lists over fifty recipes that require boiled meat (some of which relate to sauces to accompany or flavour such dishes), and forty recipes involving roasted meat; frying, grilling and baking appear fewer than ten times apiece. This ordering among cooking techniques for meats – with preference for boiling and roasting – finds agreement in other sources, as well. Ancient medical writers Hippocrates and Celsus, for example, note that meat is best eaten, and easier for the digestion, when roasted or boiled.⁷⁷ Celsus expands on such directives, cautioning that leaner meats are better suited for the stomach,⁷⁸ while Hippocrates advises that one should generally avoid meat if ill.⁷⁹ Seasonal variation is also recommended, with more boiling or stewing during winter months, and roasting or grilling in summer.⁸⁰ Combining the two forms at a single serving, however, was not always advised. Horace warns that mixing boiled and roasted meats will cause indigestion.⁸¹ Nevertheless, despite such precautions, available evidence suggests that both boiling and roasting were widespread among the meat-eating populace of antiquity, in some cases even mandated as the exclusive means by which to cook meat among the Roman army too.⁸²

What might the relationship be between these two principal methods of cooking – boiling or stewing and roasting – and issues surrounding the taste of meat in antiquity? Most likely taste was interconnected with other factors encompassing the whole dietary experience. Roasted meats generally elicit a particular set of flavours and tastes compared to boiled meats, most importantly in drawing out the Maillard reaction, but also in melting various fats within the tissues, which add to its succulence, and additionally may drip out to the flames and create smoke to further flavour the meat. Roasting arguably also might entail greater spectacle. It is enticing to watch – capturing sights and smells – often engaging a communal, festival occasion, especially if larger cuts or meat, or whole animals, are being cooked. Given the link between meat eating and feasting in antiquity, roasted meat then becomes a popular taste that may be experienced by many diners.⁸³

Stewing or boiling, in contrast to roasting, allows meats to cook down within their juices, preserving the fat and moisture, and thus the flavour and tenderness. The importance of fat for culinary tastes among the ancient Greeks and Romans has already been addressed

above. But boiling serves other purposes. First, the length of time most meat would be stewed ensures it was entirely cooked, as opposed to grilled meat that might be perceived as half-raw if it is not charred right through. The distinction between raw and cooked, even if more metaphoric than literal, is a concern for the Christian apologist Arnobius, who comments upon the pagan practices of offering “half-cooked” roasted meats for the gods.⁸⁴

A second purpose boiled or stewed meat might achieve relates to its versatility. Soaking preserved salted meat in water, for example, and then boiling it, could help remove some of the heavy, salty taste, and rejuvenate the meat for subsequent flavouring. Boiled fresh meat, without the addition of broth, spices or other foodstuffs within the stew might appear rather bland, but then again a host of sauces or browning the meat before stewing could render a range of tastes for the meat. Apicius lists a number of sauces for boiled meat, many of which include highly acidic or pungent fish sauces.⁸⁵ No doubt the versatile ways in which tastes for boiled/stewed meat could be modified was a big component in its culinary predominance in antiquity.

Finally, considerations surrounding the convenience of boiled or stewed meat surely also promoted its popularity. Boiling or stewing meat was a “one-pot” meal,⁸⁶ ideal for households, but also a convenient means by which to feed a larger crowd; one need only augment the scale of production to feed many.

The predominance of boiled or stewed meat in antiquity finds support in the zooarchaeological record as well. Preservation and post-depositional breakage patterns on many faunal assemblages often denote some manner of boiling. Charred bones or bone-ends exposed to flames (and thus suggestive of roasting meat, at least with the bones still attached) appear with low frequency, suggesting this was not a common practice.⁸⁷ By contrast, a high incidence of spirally fractured bone pieces implies deliberate breakage of fresh bones, a convenient method both to extract marrow, and to rapidly portion meat cuts for stewing. The wide degree of variation in butchery marks noted from the zooarchaeological record – in some instances indicative of somewhat haphazard cutting and chopping – would be less problematic if materials were to be boiled or stewed in a pot, where splintering would perhaps be less of a hazard. Moreover, such methods would preserve all meat as it slipped easily from the bone during cooking.

Conclusion

The integration of zooarchaeological and ancient textual evidence provides a wealth of complementary data that enhance our overall understanding of preferences for, and tastes of, meat in antiquity. A critical first step in that exploration, however, is to reconstruct and assess the role of meat in the dietary schemes of ancient Greek and Roman cultures, so that a context for how taste factored within such domains can be presented. Returning then to the initial question posed earlier in this chapter – “how did meat factor in the lives of the ancient Greeks and Romans?” – one sees that meat was consumed in a variety of settings, stretching from larger, public, communal, ritual contexts, to smaller, private, secular ones. The division between such levels was not always clear, but an expansion of meat consumption within the secular framework is evident in Roman antiquity. That expansion, moreover, appears to coincide with a greater preference for pork among a number of regions in the Roman world, an animal that provides no other critical resources aside from its meat.

Although meat was likely not consumed daily among all social classes or cultural groups in antiquity (in light of various inhibiting factors related to concepts such as availability, cost and accessibility), where meat does register it often forms a central and important foodstuff within the celebration, feast or meal under consideration, depending upon the context. As such, attention was devoted to a variety of aspects involved in the acquisition, preparation and presentation of the meat. Taste manipulation naturally formed a key variable in this regard. Consequently, this leads to the second question posed in the introduction to this chapter: was taste, as regards meat, important to the ancient Greeks and Romans? Given the prominence many of us place upon the taste of our foodstuffs today, and notions of universality in human gastronomic preferences for products that taste “good” (as culturally conscribed), it seems natural to assume that the taste of meat did matter to the ancient Greeks and Romans, even if we have no direct poll, survey or statistic among our available sources to establish, firmly, such a connection or opinion. Rather, from the pool of archaeological and ancient textual evidence that relates to taste, it is the actions, dictates, products, reflections and other particulars that inform us about the role and use of animals in antiquity, as well as the cultural behaviours and beliefs that underscore their consumption. The same is true for our interpretation of floral archaeological remains, as Livarda explores in the [next chapter](#).

As regards preferences, a penchant for fatty meat, notably pork, registers in many instances during antiquity. Fat appears to have been a desired quality in meat, adding to its tenderness and succulence. It is often employed, within the ancient texts, as a choice adjective to denote not simply a cut of meat, but also to describe the quality characteristics of any animal providing that resource. Zooarchaeological evidence helps confirm this cultural desire for fatty animals in Greek and Roman antiquity through a record of morphometric changes in consumed livestock, especially efforts to breed larger, fatter breeds. Such data further illustrate how the taste of meat could be modified by manipulating the feeding regime of the animals consumed, such as in providing a concentrated acorn diet to hogs, or consuming younger animals not yet weaned from a diet of milk. Illuminating these aspects further, through more nuanced reconstructions of diets in individual animals, provides a framework for future investigation. Advancements in isotopic analyses of zooarchaeological remains provide another outlet for exploration in this regard.

Methods to shape the taste of meat through feeding and breeding regimes in animals themselves were not the only schemes available; the taste of meat in antiquity was also affected by the manner in which it was prepared, preserved or cooked. Roasted meats are represented in our record for antiquity, but tend to align with “spectacle” events, linked with public display or ostentation, like communal sacrifices and lavish dinner parties. These show less direct representation in the zooarchaeological record, where boiled or stewed meats predominate. While this may be shaped by convenience and economics, such practices also maximize taste, since stews could be created, mixed and spiced with different flavourings. One of these flavourings, salt, functioned as both a preservative and a seasoning. The dual role of salt could be the subject of further integrated archaeological and historical research, since advancements in archaeological science are increasing our ability to refine the detection and characterization of chemical compounds (including salts) among material remains.

Deciphering precisely whether tastes shaped the preparation, preservation and cooking methods of meats or whether the methods themselves imposed a range of tastes upon the meats is not readily resolved, but whatever the line of influence may be, such tastes became woven into the gastronomic fabric of antiquity. The preparation and seasoning of meat has the potential to arouse multiple

taste receptors in the mouth, notably perhaps the more pleasant (and addictive) ones including sweet, salty, and *umami*. Lack of refrigeration would inevitably impose limitations upon how meat could be stored and preserved in antiquity, but a range of means with which to acquire, season, prepare and cook meat could expose some individuals to a much wider array of meats and any resultant tastes that could be achieved under such conditions. The potential for experiencing a range of tastes, moreover, may expand in relation to one's wealth. Ultimately, our integration of environmental and cultural evidence, drawn from multiple sources, will illuminate the extent to which many aspects of human behaviour and experience in Greek and Roman antiquity display regional variation.

1The contributions of zooarchaeological research to the wider investigation of animals in antiquity are outlined in MacKinnon (2007), along with an extensive bibliography of zooarchaeological reports from various Greek and Roman sites. Garnsey (1999), Wilkins & Hill (2006) and Potter (2015) provide a strong foundation for understanding food in antiquity on a general level. For more focused studies of the role of meat in Greek antiquity, particularly its association with ritual sacrifice and feasting, see Burkert ([1972] 1983), Ekroth (2007, 2014) and Faraone & Naiden (2012). The contribution of meat to the Roman diet is discussed by Corbier (1989), King (1999) and MacKinnon (2004). For a fuller account of evidence associated with butchering, preserving, seasoning and cooking meat in Roman antiquity, see Chioffi (1999) and MacKinnon (2004).

2In light of the complexities inherent in the assessment of “taste” in antiquity, one should appreciate that when the term is used in this chapter it might best be considered in quotations, to qualify its problematic and potentially multifarious nature.

3Rudolph's introduction to this volume delves more deeply into the challenges of defining and assessing the concept of “taste”. Indeed, these complexities are a key theme throughout the volume. For further discussion concerning “taste” and the archaeological record, see Livarda (Chapter 10).

4As noted by Livarda (Chapter 10), similar concerns apply to the study of archaeobotanical remains from ancient sites.

5Considerable scholarship exists for these topics. See MacKinnon (2007) for an overview of broader themes in osteological research in classical archaeology and a more extensive bibliography of related discussions, examples and case studies.

6See Banducci (Chapter 7) for further information about the contribution of fish to the diet during the Republic in Italy, including commentary on select textual references for the role of fishing in antiquity.

7MacKinnon (2004); Garnsey (1999: 122). See Hitch (Chapter 1) for meat as a marker of status and achievement among Homeric kings.

8MacKinnon (2004). On meat in Jewish and early Christian contexts, see Caseau (Chapter 13).

9Martial 4.66.

10Juvenal 6.38–40.

11See Ghisleni *et al.* (2013) and Vaccaro *et al.* (2013) for further commentary.

- 12MacKinnon (2004: 209).
- 13Sirks (1991).
- 14NISP = Number of Identified Specimens, a common zooarchaeological quantifier. Data for these calculations derive largely from King (1999); MacKinnon (2004, 2010a); and sources listed in MacKinnon (2007). The temporal distinctions are here meant as only rough guides for general comparisons: c. 1000–100 BCE for “Pre-Roman/Iron Age” and c. 100 BCE–300 CE for “Roman”.
- 15The important role landscapes (*terroir*) assume in shaping food production schemes in antiquity is also articulated in the chapters by Banducci (Chapter 7), Livarda (Chapter 10) and Boulay (Chapter 11).
- 16See Banducci (Chapter 7) for further discussion of pork consumption in Italy.
- 17Again, as with the concept of “taste”, the term “Romanization” might best be expressed in quotation marks, to qualify its complicated and debated nature. For simplicity, however, such quotations are implied among subsequent use of the term in this chapter. See Banducci (Chapter 7) for further commentary on the controversy surrounding the term “Romanization”.
- 18Banducci (Chapter 7) also comments upon this theme.
- 19King (1999: 188–9).
- 20MacKinnon (2010a: 171–2).
- 21See Banducci (Chapter 7) for this phenomenon on urban sites in Republican Italy.
- 22See Livarda (Chapter 10) for the influence Roman armies had upon the archaeobotanical record.
- 23King (1999: 189–90).
- 24Corbier (1989) and Ekroth (2007) provide good overviews of these divisions.
- 25See Hitch (Chapter 1) for more on ritual meat consumption in Greek literature and Caseau (Chapter 13) for meat consumption in early Christian religious practice.
- 26Harris (1985: 27).
- 27The scale of these events, and the public or private nature of them, could vary, as might the means of distribution of meat at such festivals, or its provisioning afterwards (in whatever manner the latter might take: e.g. markets, private sale, free rations, etc.). There is a vast pool of literature regarding animal sacrifice and meat eating in classical Greek antiquity. Some of the larger works include Burkert ([1972] 1983), Detienne & Vernant (1989), Faraone & Naiden (2012) and Ekroth (2014).
- 28For a case study of these concerns from zooarchaeological remains collected from excavations at the Athenian Agora, see MacKinnon (2014).
- 29MacKinnon (2004).
- 30Harris (1985: 41). Rudolph’s introduction to this volume provides further references for human predilection for the tastes of fat (and sugar).
- 31For details see Semper *et al.* (n.d.).
- 32Hesiod, *Theogony* 590–3. This form of sacrifice to the gods surfaces also in Homer (*Odyssey* 3.510–70; *Iliad* 7.362–6). For a wider discussion, see Ekroth (2007, 2014).
- 33The situation for “non-sacred” meat consumption in Greek antiquity is complicated since directives and research biases across all three lines of evidence (i.e. textual, iconographical and zooarchaeological) for the region have traditionally focused upon ritual contexts, chiefly materials associated with burnt sacrifices on altars. Nevertheless, cases exist where the patterns provided from recovered zooarchaeological remains from ancient Greek sites do not accord neatly with prescribed ritual practices or settings, thus offering some

- critique on meat consumption being tied solely and universally to “sacred” contexts in Greek antiquity. See MacKinnon (2014) for further discussion of this issue, using materials from the Athenian Agora.
- 34For example, Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.22d, 1.25d, 2.65c–d, 3.96d–e, 3.107e, 5.188f.
- 35Columella, *On Agriculture (De re rustica)* 7.9.4.
- 36Pliny, *Natural History (Historia naturalis)* 10.39–40.
- 37These authors often refer to fat metaphorically to address various social and moral stances surrounding dietary ostentation. See Gowers (1993: 147–8, 183–5) for further discussion
- 38Lard and grease, for example, are both listed at twelve *denarii* per pound in Diocletian’s Price Edict (*Edictum Diocletiani de pretiis rerum venalium*) 4.10. These were more expensive than comparable weights of most meats.
- 39Diocletian’s Price Edict 4.17–23.
- 40Varro, *On Agriculture (De re rustica)* 2.4.4, 2.4.12; Juvenal 13.117–18; Propertius 4.1.a.21–4; Macrobius, *Satires* 5.11.23.
- 41Of course such value is relative; for pork taboos see Harris (1985: 73–86). Some Semitic cultures avoided pork, but wider Greco-Roman antiquity presumably did not.
- 42MacKinnon (2004: 197–204).
- 43MacKinnon (2004: 155).
- 44MacKinnon (2001).
- 45MacKinnon (2010b).
- 46Rixson (2000: 8).
- 47Varro, *On Agriculture* 2.4.3; Pliny, *Natural History* 8.209, 9.57.
- 48Martial 11.41; Aelian, *On the Nature of Animals (De natura animalium)* 8.9; *Digesta* 19.5.14.3, 39.3.1.15; Strabo 5.1.12.
- 49Horace, *Satires* 2.4.40–3.
- 50Virgil, *Georgics* 2.250; Macrobius, *Satires* 1.21.4; Martial 14.71.
- 51Parsons (1962: 22).
- 52Columella, *On Agriculture* 7.9.4; Palladius 3.153; Pliny, *Natural History* 8.77.
- 53Columella, *On Agriculture* 6.3.
- 54Cato, *On Agriculture (De agricultura)*. 6.3, 30.1, 54.1–2; Varro, *On Agriculture* 2.5.14; Aelian, *On the Nature of Animals* 17.30; Horace, *Epistles* 1.16.9–10.
- 55Virgil, *Eclogues* 6.4–5.
- 56See Baker ([Chapter 8](#)) for additional discussion of food pretreatment and cooking, especially in relation to dictates provided by the ancient medical writers.
- 57Semper *et al.* (n.d.).
- 58Van Wijngaarden-Bakker (1984: 195).
- 59Rixson (1989: 53).
- 60Unsalted meat could be kept for only a few days in the summertime, according to Apicius 1.7.1.
- 61For example, see Macrobius, *Satires* 3.17.9 (dried meat); Persius 6.69–73 (smoked pig’s cheek); Diocletian’s Price Edict 4.15–16 (smoked sausages).
- 62A small sample of references to salted meat includes: Cato, *On Agriculture* 162.1–3; Columella, *On Agriculture* 12.55.1–4; Martial 1.4; Macrobius, *Satires* 3.17.9, 7.12; Strabo 3.4.11, 4.3.2, 4.4.3; Diocletian’s Price Edict 4.7 and numerous occurrences in Apicius.
- 63Cato, *On Agriculture* 162.3.
- 64Translation my own.
- 65Some examples are shown in Chioffi (1999), Corbier (1989) and Toynbee (1973).

- 66Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 8.663–78) recounts a case of an elderly, impoverished couple undertaking smoking of meat (presumably on a small scale) within their home, in preparing menu items for a dinner with guests.
- 67Columella, *On Agriculture* 12.55.1–4; Cato, *On Agriculture* 162.1–3; Macrobius, *Satires* 7.12; Apicius 1.8–10.
- 68The latter two meats are still key ingredients in Italian cuisine in the form of pancetta and baccalà (dried cod). See Riley (2007), s.v. *Pancetta, Baccalà*.
- 69Apicius 1.7.1–2.
- 70Schmid (1972).
- 71MacKinnon (2004: 185).
- 72MacKinnon (2002).
- 73Great social ridicule and disdain resulted from accusations of rancid, rotten meat being served at Roman dinner parties (e.g. Horace, *Satires* 2.2.89–93; Cicero, *Against Piso (In Pisonem)* 67; Statius, *Silvae* 4.9).
- 74The effect salt has in driving diets and behaviours extends beyond humans as well. The Roman agricultural writer Columella, in his *On Agriculture* (7.3.20), notes that the taste of a salt lick administered to pasturing sheep induces great desire in them to eat and drink. Aelian (*On the Nature of Animals* 9.3) notes that mice breed more prolifically if they ingest salt.
- 75Tekol (2006). Rudolph (introduction to this volume) provides further commentary.
- 76Semper *et al.* (n.d.).
- 77Celsus, *On Medicine (De medicina)* 1.2.8, 1.3.24.
- 78Hippocrates, *Regimen in Health* 1.1–20 L 6.1–25; Celsus, *On Medicine* 2.24.1–3.
- 79Hippocrates, *On Affections* 49 L 6.258, 52 L 6.260.
- 80Celsus, *On Medicine* 1.3.34–5, 1.6.2.
- 81Horace, *Satires* 2.2.73–6.
- 82Appian, *Hispania* 85; Frontinus, *Stratagems (Strategemata)* 41.1–2; Polyaeus, *Stratagems (Strategemata)* 8.16.2.
- 83The appeal to a variety of senses (e.g. taste, sight, smell) in this regard is noteworthy. See Clements (2015) for further discussion of the experience and symbolism of smells associated with roasted meats and fats in ancient feasting and sacrifice.
- 84Arnobius 2.68. See Caseau ([Chapter 13](#)) for Jewish and early Christian injunctions against eating bloody meat.
- 85Apicius 7.6.1–14.
- 86The notion of “one-pot” meal is further developed by Banducci ([Chapter 7](#)) in relation to ceramic evidence.
- 87Here excluding deliberately burnt sacrificial materials, as in some ritual practices.

Tastes in the Roman provinces

An archaeobotanical approach to socio-cultural change

Alexandra Livarda

Taste is a complicated matter.¹ Give a plate of Brussels sprouts to a heterogeneous group of people and you will receive a range of responses, from disgusting to delicious. What determines food preferences is subject to much scholarly research, which stresses the social context as an important element in the development of tastes.² Conditioned by the social environment, tastes are far from static. When one is faced, for instance, with new products, the choice to partly or fully integrate them into one's diet, or conversely to ignore or reject them, can reflect cultural or social affinities, certain preconceptions, and in the longer term, the development of human relations as well as economic and political choices.

It is such new products and their trajectory within novel social contexts that I explore in this chapter. I sketch what "Roman tastes" meant and how they were perceived and employed outside the core of the Empire, for which less historical, epigraphic and iconographic evidence exists, providing also a framework for comparison with the evidence from Rome presented by Banducci in [Chapter 7](#). The provinces I examine here are those included in modern-day Germany, Denmark, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg France and Great Britain. The time frame I explore in this chapter spans the mid-first century BCE to the end of the fourth century CE. Archaeology and in particular archaeobotany, the study of plant remains recovered in excavations, is employed as a tool to investigate tastes in the provinces.³

The study of food and plant remains in archaeology, however, is not without biases. Several natural and cultural factors determine the composition, preservation and interpretation of assemblages, all of which need to be taken into account in order to reduce potential

biases in any analysis.⁴ Cultural factors include all the decisions past people made regarding procurement, processing, consumption and disposal of the available plant resources, but also current decisions by archaeologists, for instance, about how to sample, process, and quantify plant remains, and identify the routes of entry of the different elements in an archaeobotanical assemblage, in a similar fashion to zooarchaeological datasets, as described, for instance, by MacKinnon in the [previous chapter](#). Natural factors refer to all the taphonomic processes that operate during deposition of the material, such as soil acidity and the qualities of a plant or plant part that can determine its survival rate when in contact, for instance, with fire. Regarding taste, one of the greatest challenges when using primary evidence is how individual ingredients were combined into foods to produce certain flavours. Archaeologists recover items spilled and charred during food preparation and cooking, discarded leftovers and refuse, stored products accidentally burnt, and so on.⁵ Occasionally, processed foods are unearthed, allowing insights into possible ingredient combinations and preparation methods.⁶ Normally, however, reconstructing a dish is extremely difficult and, even more so, establishing how this may have tasted. An excellent means to explore taste in archaeology is through seasonings and other foods or snacks that, although not essential for subsistence, provide refinement in flavour.

With their often strong savours, aromas or thermal attributes, seasonings stimulate the senses and can contribute to how people experience and perceive their food and drink.⁷ Additionally, spices and condiments had other uses as medicines, incense and in perfumery, further stimulating the senses and enriching experience.⁸ The following discussion explores the introduction of herbs, condiments, fruits, vegetables and nuts, referred to conventionally here as “flavourings”, in the northern provinces, and examines their social distribution. The results are then woven together to investigate taste and its meaning in the Roman periphery. In doing so, this chapter provides an alternative lens through which tastes in the metropolitan centres at the core of the Empire can be understood and evaluated. First, however, it is necessary to establish definitions that will permit a more nuanced understanding of “taste”.

Defining taste

Defining taste is a rather challenging task, as can be seen not only

from a cursory glance at dictionaries and texts, but also, importantly, in the contributions to this volume.⁹ What becomes evident is that on a basic level, simple, one-word descriptions cannot convey the complexities of the aromas and savours that constitute the experience of each plant. Even in modern contexts, attempts to provide more detailed descriptions can seem vague and often resort to references to other species.¹⁰ A useful avenue may thus be to employ the interrelated concepts of *taste*, *gustation* and *flavour*. Although the first two are often used interchangeably in modern scholarly literature, here I will distinguish between taste and gustation to provide a purpose-built definition of the former that will allow for more analytical depth.

Gustation is a chemical sense as detected by the taste receptors located on the tongue, mouth and pharynx of individuals and can be classified as sweet, salty, sour, bitter and *umami*.¹¹ Such a technical description of gustation is thus too basic to convey the full intersensory effect on the palate, for example, when consuming a condiment. *Flavour* adds another level of complexity, since it refers to the sensation generated by the combination of the gustatory, olfactory, tactile and thermal attributes of food and influenced by other somatosensual stimuli, including the visual and auditory.¹² Small and Prescott suggest that flavour is the result of the central integration of multisensory inputs in the brain to produce a single *perception* and thus can be defined by this very function.¹³ Similarly, Auvray and Spence advocate that flavour should be defined as a *perceptual*, rather than sensory, modality that combines different qualities and senses into one unified percept by the act of eating.¹⁴

Building on these suggestions, I propose here a working definition of *taste* as the culturally specific and socially subjective “experience of flavour”. This allows the attribution of preferences and the introduction of nominal categories, such as ideas and practices, in relation to foods and their flavours. “Taste” in this respect is something ephemeral, which can, nevertheless, be understood within the socio-cultural framework of a particular period, thereby allowing us access to what such tastes possibly meant to different people.¹⁵ The quest, therefore, to understand the “actual flavour” of food through bodily senses in the Roman northern provinces is considered here as a restricted research avenue without the experiential factor that allows associations to be established; in this case, between ingredients, foods, flavours and, most importantly, contexts. Through its association with particular contexts, food can taste familiar or exotic, comforting or

daring, protective or dangerous. Thus, eating choices are intrinsically linked to who we are or who we want to be.¹⁶ Of particular importance in our pursuit of Roman tastes in the northern provinces is, therefore, who had access to the new flavourings and what their spatial and temporal pattern of supply and use would have been. In the sections that follow, I employ such a relational and contextual approach to explore new tastes on the culinary palette of the northern Roman provinces, focusing on plant resources.

Charting new flavours

Before the army came the merchants. Indeed contact between the Mediterranean and the north had been established long before the marching of the Roman armies and intensified by the late Iron Age. Regarding food plants this manifests in the trade of Mediterranean products recovered in central and northern Europe before the onset of the Roman Empire.¹⁷ What changed with the Roman expansion was the scale of these activities. Under Rome, exchanges became more regular, increasing in both quantity and variety, as attested by a large archaeobotanical dataset compiled and updated since 2004.¹⁸ Seasonings and dressings were quite popular in Roman cooking, at least among the upper levels of society, as suggested by their frequent appearance in surviving Roman texts. Apicius and Columella mention several herbs and spices as ingredients in complex sauces, including many of the archaeologically identified flavourings. Apart from several locally available condiments in the Mediterranean, spices were imported from the south and the east. The Roman ports on the Red Sea, such as that of Berenike¹⁹ and Quseir al-Qadim,²⁰ have provided ample archaeobotanical evidence for the trade of spices, which were then shipped to Rome, and from there, found their way to places as far north as Britain and Denmark.

Fifty-six condiments, fruits, vegetables and nuts that were largely absent or rare before the expansion of the Empire appear in the northern provinces in this study. Condiments formed the bulk of the “new-comers”, followed by fruits (Table 10.1). The most frequent of the former were coriander, celery and dill. Fruits included several typical Mediterranean species, such as grapes and figs, others that had to be imported from further away, like dates, and possibly different varieties of already existing species, like apples. Turnip was by far the most commonly found vegetable, suggesting that its cultivation and

usage increased significantly, and a new suite of nuts also arrived.

To chart the dispersal of these flavourings all records with archaeobotanical information were divided into three chronological phases: early (R1), middle (R2) and late (R3) (Table 10.2). The results show that forty-three of these were present from the beginning of the Roman conquest and another ten were added after the end of the first century CE (phase R2; Table 10.1). The earliest archaeological finds of medlar, lovage and alexanders (horse parsley) were recovered from contexts without precise dating, although that of the first two is limited to the first/second century CE. Flavourings added between the second and mid-third century CE (phase R2) were overall rare species. Some of them were very difficult to grow in northern Europe, such as apricot,²¹ and their perishable nature may have also prevented regular trade. During phase R2 the infrastructure and network supplying the armies and the towns of the northern provinces had been consolidated, allowing importation and experimentation with a greater variety of food plants among other products. No new flavourings were added during phase R3 according to the available archaeobotanical dataset.

Table 10.1 Flavourings identified in the study area, their occurrence status and phase of first record (R1 = early Roman, R2 = middle Roman, R3 = late Roman, R = Roman)

Species name	English name	Plant type	Occurrence	Phase of first record
<i>Coriandrum sativum</i>	coriander	condiment	abundant	R1
<i>Apium graveolens</i>	celery	condiment	abundant	R1
<i>Anethum graveolens</i>	dill	condiment	abundant	R1
<i>Satureja hortensis</i>	summer savory	condiment	medium	R1
<i>Brassica nigra</i>	black mustard	condiment	medium	R1
<i>Origanum vulgare</i>	oregano	condiment	medium	R2
<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>	fennel	condiment	medium	R1
<i>Capparis spinosa</i>	capers	condiment	rare	R1
<i>Carum carvi</i>	caraway	condiment	rare	R1

<i>Cuminum cyminum</i>	cumin	condiment	rare	R2
<i>Levisticum officinale</i>	lovage	condiment	rare	R1 or R2
<i>Marrubium vulgare</i>	horehound	condiment	rare	R2
<i>Melissa officinalis</i>	balm	condiment	rare	R2
<i>Nigella sativa</i>	black cumin	condiment	rare	R1
<i>Ocimum basilicum</i>	basil	condiment	rare	R2
<i>Origanum majorana</i>	marjoram	condiment	rare	R2
<i>Petroselinum crispum</i>	parsley	condiment	rare	R1
<i>Pimpinella anisum</i>	aniseed	condiment	rare	R1
<i>Piper nigrum</i>	black pepper	condiment	rare	R1
<i>Ruta graveolens</i>	rue	condiment	rare	R1
<i>Salvia officinalis</i>	sage	condiment	rare	R2
<i>Sinapis alba</i>	white mustard	condiment	rare	R1
<i>Smyrniium olusatrum</i>	alexanders	condiment	rare	R – no precise dating
<i>Thymus vulgaris</i>	thyme	condiment	rare	R1
<i>Trigonella foenum- graecum</i>	fenugreek	condiment	rare	R1
<i>Brassica napus</i>	rape	condiment/ oil-producing	rare	R1
<i>Sesamum indicum</i>	sesame	condiment/ oil-producing	rare	R2
<i>Vitis vinifera</i>	grape	fruit	abundant	R1
<i>Ficus carica</i>	fig	fruit	abundant	R1
<i>Prunus avium</i>	sweet cherry	fruit	abundant	R1
<i>Malus</i> sp.	apple	fruit	abundant	R1
<i>Prunus domestica</i> ssp.	damson	fruit	abundant	R1

<i>insititia</i>				
<i>Prunus domestica</i>	plum	fruit	abundant	R1
<i>Persica vulgaris</i>	peach	fruit	medium	R1
<i>Pyrus sp.</i>	pear	fruit	medium	R1
<i>Olea europea</i>	olive	fruit	medium	R1
<i>Phoenix dactylifera</i>	date	fruit	medium	R1
<i>Morus nigra</i>	mulberry	fruit	medium	R1
<i>Prunus cerasus</i>	sour cherry	fruit	medium	R1
<i>Cucumis melo</i>	melon	fruit	rare	R1
<i>Armeniaca vulgaris</i>	apricot	fruit	rare	R2
<i>Cydonia oblonga</i>	quince	fruit	rare	R1
<i>Mespilus germanica</i>	medlar	fruit	rare	R1 or R2
<i>Punica granatum</i>	pomegranate	fruit	rare	R1
<i>Juglans regia</i>	walnut	nut	abundant	R1
<i>Pinus pinea</i>	pine nut	nut	medium	R1
<i>Amygdalus communis</i>	almond	nut	rare	R1
<i>Pistacia vera</i>	pistachio	nut	rare	R1
<i>Brassica rapa</i>	turnip	vegetable	medium	R1
incl. ssp. <i>campestris</i>				
<i>Cucumis sativus</i>	cucumber	vegetable	rare	R1
<i>Allium cepa</i>	onion	vegetable	rare	R2
<i>Allium sativum</i>	garlic	vegetable	rare	R1
<i>Lagenaria siceraria</i>	bottle gourd	vegetable	rare	R1
<i>Brassica oleracea</i>	cabbage	vegetable	rare	R1
<i>Allium porrum</i>	leak	vegetable	rare	R2
<i>Lactuca sativa</i>	lettuce	vegetable	rare	R1

[Table 10.2](#)Classification of the Roman phases

Phase	Code	Description
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Early Roman	R1	Mid-first century BCE to end of first century CE
Middle Roman	R2	Second to mid-third century CE
Late Roman	R3	Mid-third century onwards, until the end of the fourth century CE

The desire for flavourings in the northern provinces was not short-lived. [Figure 10.1](#) shows the relative proportion of the occurrence of some of the most frequently encountered species in each phase. The picture is remarkably similar for all these flavourings, reaching the highest number of occurrences in phase R2 and in phase R3 returning to their R1 or slightly lower levels. The same pattern is observed for the other flavourings with some exceptions. The occurrence of black mustard, for instance, although declining in phase R3, is still higher than the phase R1 levels, which could possibly indicate its stronger permeation in the tastes of the provinces. For a few other species, such as date, fennel, olive and peach, the decline in phase R3 is much more pronounced. The increased unrest towards the end of the Empire played a part, causing disruptions in the trade network, but other socio-cultural reasons would have also contributed. Research on dates, for instance, suggests that their use in the northern provinces was strongly linked with specific ritual contexts and mystic cults, including that of Isis, and they were probably employed as a symbolic item in burial customs reinforcing cultural and ritual identities.²² Thus, their waning use and archaeological absence after the mid-third century CE may be partly related to changing customs and forms of religious expression and practice.²³ For the rare species in the dataset ([Table 10.1](#)) a pattern is difficult to discern. Although some are present in all phases, most occur only in phase R1 or R2. Preservation issues may play a part.²⁴ Equally, they may have simply been brought over as specific requests or as attempts to import and try out new ingredients that failed to become popular.

Overall, there seems to be a core of flavourings with a greater impact on tastes within the northern Roman world, having a relatively more stable presence throughout, such as those clustered as ‘abundant’ in [Table 10.1](#), like coriander. Others seem to remain in the periphery of culinary regimes, notably black cumin, fenugreek, sesame and other

rare flavourings listed in [Table 10.1](#)²⁵ (see also [Figure 10.1](#)). With the introduction or increased availability of all these flavourings, blending of new ingredients to produce combinations of stronger or new flavours, and thus distinct culinary experiences, became possible.

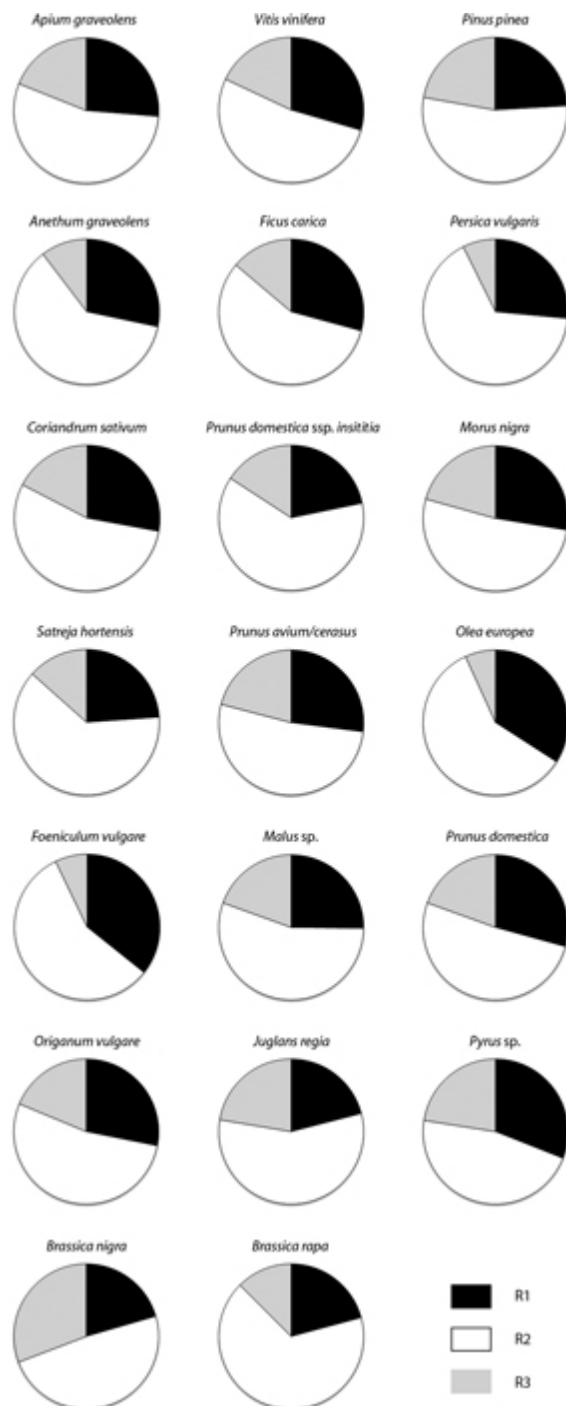


Figure 10.1 Relative proportion of the occurrence of selected flavourings in each phase

Ancient recipes and cookbooks are particularly useful in helping to

understand such possible combinations.²⁶ Here some indicative examples of common combinations attractive to the Roman palate are highlighted. Pepper features in most recipes attributed to Apicius²⁷ and is mentioned as an ingredient not only in savoury dishes, but also in puddings.²⁸ Combinations of sweet and bitter or pungent are in fact common in Roman recipes.²⁹ In another of Apicius' sweet recipes, pepper, nuts, honey, rue, raisin wine, milk and eggs are combined to produce a pudding; rue adding a bitter tone to the dish.³⁰ Several condiments, among which coriander, savory, celery and mustard, in various combinations with wine, vinegar, must, fruit juice, fish sauce, oil, milk and/or honey, were used as sauces for birds and other meat.³¹ Raisins and other fruits were also employed in meat recipes. Another interesting combination is that of vinegar with mustard, an example of which is provided in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists* 4.133e (late second century CE), which mentions mixing vinegar and must with pounded raisins and mustard seeds for a turnip dish. The overall impression is thus of a preference for strong and rather complex flavours, sour and sweet, sweet and pungent, bitter and sweet, sour and salty and so on, layered with several Mediterranean bittersweet and tangy herb aromas.

The proliferation of *mortaria* (multi-purpose mixing-bowls) since the late Iron Age, but more intensively from the beginning of the Roman period, may add some support to the adoption of more complex flavours in the provinces. Residue analysis of *mortaria* mostly from Britain but also from the Continent showed that both animal and plant products, with a heavy emphasis on the latter, were processed in the same vessel in a novel way of resource preparation.³² Residue analysis, nevertheless, cannot provide details of the exact ingredients so a direct association with novel flavourings cannot be proven. Indeed, in some sites, continuation in the use of common Iron Age products has been detected.³³ Local products and traditional tastes would have continued to provide the bulk of subsistence, as after all, food habits are particularly conservative.³⁴ However, the same ingredients, sometimes "peppered" with novel ones, could have been combined in different ways.

Other locally available products became more common in the provinces within the context of diversification or because of the desire for increasing complexity in tastes. Apples and cherries, for instance, although present before the Romans, were used more widely thanks to the adoption of new technologies, like grafting,³⁵ and trade expansion.³⁶ Archaeobotanical evidence³⁷ also indicates an apparent

increase in the collection and consumption of wild fruits, nuts and some herbs, from the Iron Age to the Roman period in the northern provinces. Sykes observed a similar pattern for animal exploitation in Britain and interpreted these trends as evidence of changing attitudes towards “nature” and “wilderness”.³⁸ She argued that wild resource avoidance in the Iron Age was replaced by greater ordering and taming of the wild by the Romans.

Changing tastes seem to have thus been intertwined with processes of cultural change. Furthermore, the greater usage of wild resources may be translated to a larger resource base, more familiar and accessible to the local population. This could be used in new ways, incorporated into cuisine in order to experiment and achieve new flavour combinations. Recipes, after all, are flexible, allowing those cooking to replace, change and adapt ingredients according to availability and culinary preferences. Apples, berries, sloes and other wild fruits would have added sweet and sour flavours and wild herbs could have added extra aromas to dishes. These could have been used in the context of seeking increasingly composite flavours or as alternatives to other more expensive or difficult to acquire and maintain products. An archaeobotanical example of this might be the case of caraway. Its Roman occurrences are rather limited and localised, being found almost exclusively in modern-day Germany.³⁹ This has been interpreted as possibly localised adoption of caraway – a known and available herb in that area – for cultivation and trade within the context of a more varied cuisine and the increased demand for condiments by the army.⁴⁰

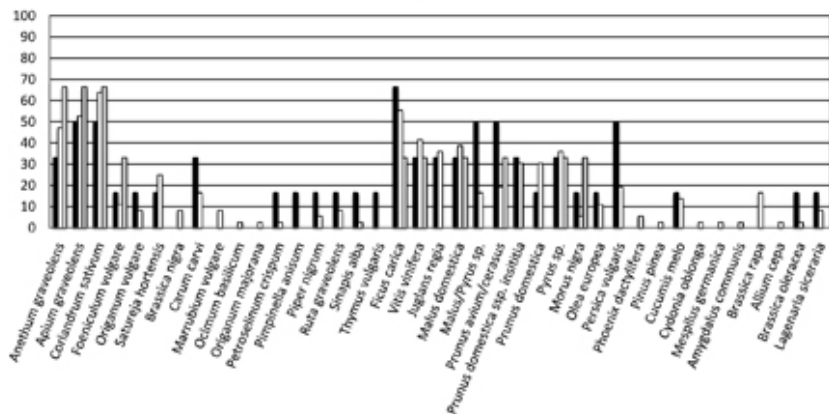
In reality, the processes involved in the emergence, permeation and fluctuation of new plants and tastes in the provinces were complex and multifaceted, with several factors playing an interrelated role in their development. Appreciating these, however, necessitates understanding what tastes were “translated” to; this is attempted in the following section by contextualising the archaeobotanical data.

You are what you taste

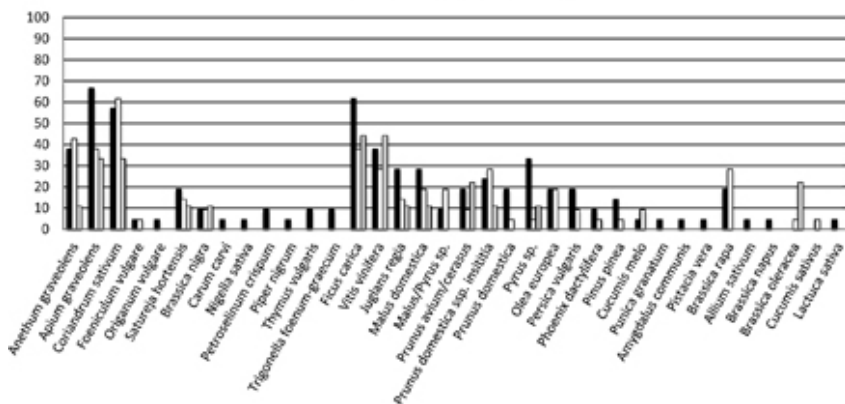
To incorporate contextual information, all sites with archaeobotanical data were categorised according to their function and character.⁴¹ Building on previous studies,⁴² the number of occurrences of each flavouring at a given site type was then calculated as a proportion of

the total number of this site type per phase (Figure 10.2).⁴³ As more data are collected these proportions may change but the available sample can be safely used as a relative means of comparison between site types to highlight the emerging general pattern. So, for example in the case of major towns we can trace the proportion of the number of occurrences of dill (*Anethum graveolens*) over the total number of major towns that have introduced food plant remains in the R1, R2 and R3 phase (see Table 10.2 and Figure 10.2).

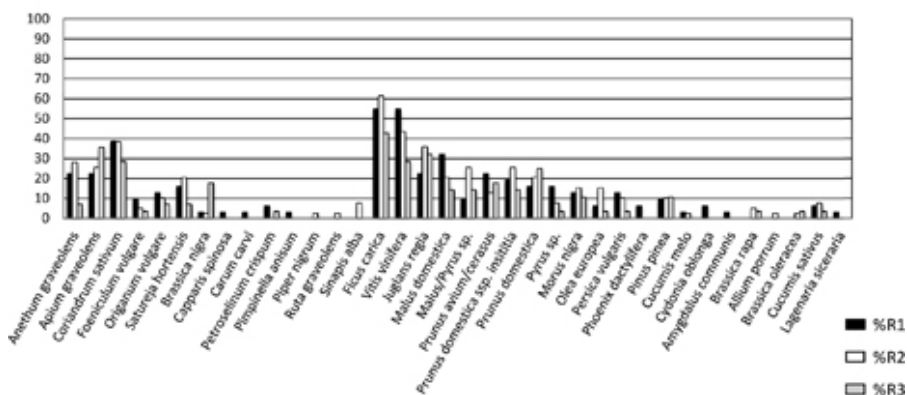
military extramural



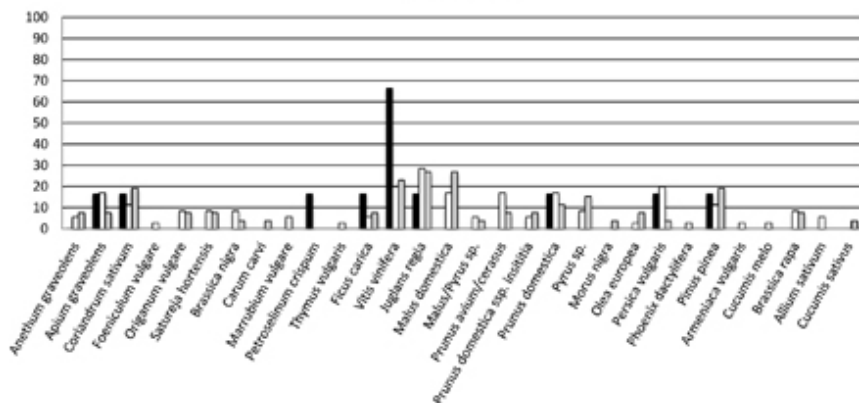
military intramural



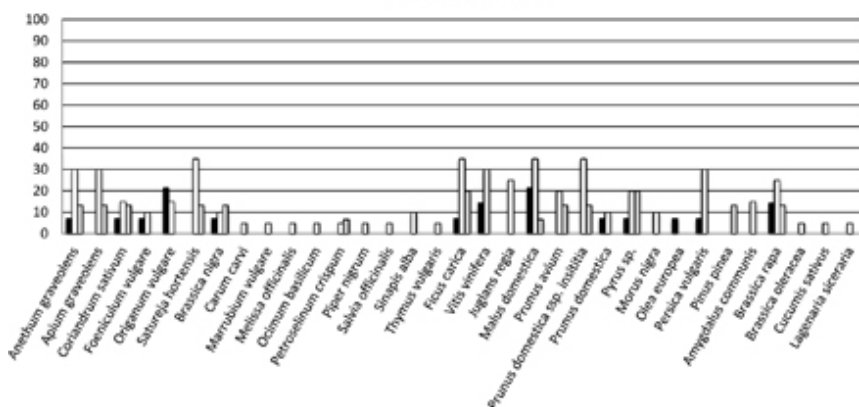
major town



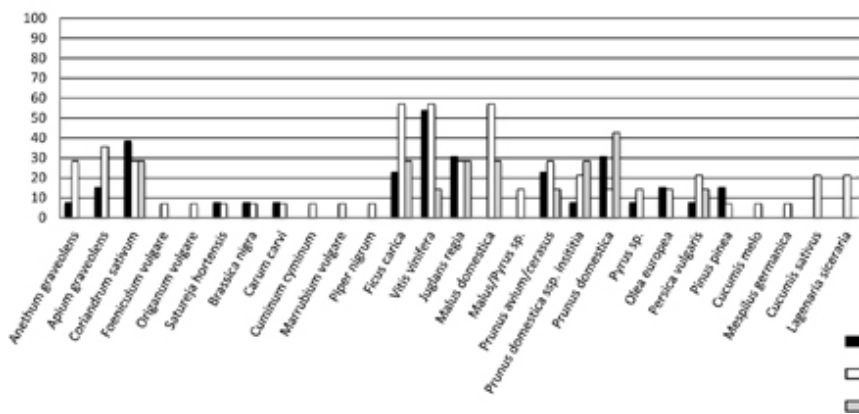
rural elite



rural nucleated



minor town



■ %R1
□ %R2
▒ %R3

rural lesser

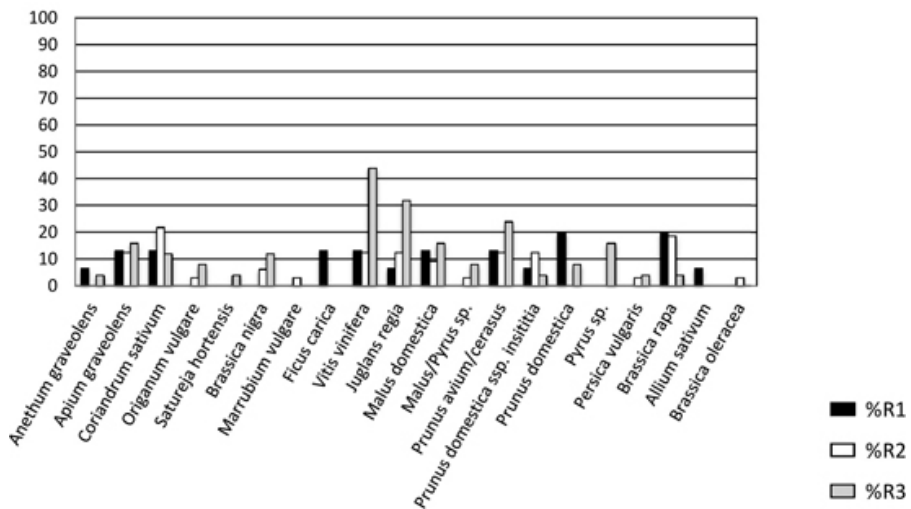


Figure 10.2 The number of occurrences of all flavourings by site type (excluding ceremonial) and phase, as a proportion of the total number of a given site type per phase with all classes of new food plants

The results show that significant changes in the consumption patterns may be linked to the movement and emergence of new population groups, like the townsfolk and the army, and the ensuing modifications in settlement patterns, economic links and so on.⁴⁴ The analysis also demonstrates that not everybody in the provinces had access to new flavourings, with lesser rural sites, for instance, having generally lower proportions and a more restricted range of these. With the increasing availability, however, of certain new ingredients and possibly spaces for their cultivation, such as herb and vegetable gardens as well as orchards, more people in the provinces became acquainted with their presence and their use in culinary regimes, as we can tell from the widespread distribution, for instance, of coriander and cherries. In fact, with the consolidation of the Empire, incentives were given to farmers to cultivate land to provide for the army,⁴⁵ which was responsible for the initial introduction and intensification of both the production and the consumption of several new flavourings, such as many condiments and fruits (Figure 10.2). In a similar vein, in the [previous chapter](#), MacKinnon highlighted the role of the army in pig consumption as witnessed by the increased presence of pig bones in military sites in several areas of the Empire. The movement of people and the settlement of migrants also would have facilitated the spread of culinary knowledge.⁴⁶ Non-elite rural settlements⁴⁷ and towns in phase R2 seem to have been acting as

trading foci for several of these plants (Figure 10.2). Their very nature, attracting people of all ranks and offices, would have also allowed an increasing visibility of these products to a greater cross-section of the population. Therefore, it seems that the overall framework of culinary- and food-related methods or manners, which would have allowed new tastes to develop, was changing.

Similar trends have also been observed in studies focusing on the dispersal of twenty selected food plants in central Europe.⁴⁸ Such studies indicate that initially these plants were almost exclusively associated with military sites, but eventually reached civilian settlements, such as towns and rural elite sites. Only some of the most commonly encountered fruits and nuts examined, all of which could be locally cultivated, found their way to other rural sites, where they may also been cultivated.⁴⁹ Fig was highlighted in all studies as a surprisingly common import.

In the following sections, I tease out the most conspicuous results outlined so far, suggesting that three “tastes” blend together in the creation of the new culinary world of the provinces: the tastes of memory and power, cosmopolitanism and of a globalised world.

Flavours of home, tastes of memory and power

A very strong association emerged between the northward dispersal of flavourings and the military on the one hand, and major towns, on the other. The most exotic flavourings remained rare and they do not seem to have formed part of the regular diet even for these population groups.⁵⁰ Rather, the common denominator in these social sectors seems to be the greater variety and availability of more flavours to them. Fresh fruits provided extra sweetness along with the ever-present dried figs, possibly raisins and honey. The Roman soldiers when on the march also had regular rations of vinegar, which could be diluted with water and drunk as refreshment, usually containing various crushed products including dried figs, peaches or other fruits and honey.⁵¹ Vinegar as a preservative agent could have been effective in prolonging the consumption life of fruits, in which case it would have also contributed to a sweet and sour/acidic flavour combination seemingly favoured by the Romans.⁵² Such concoctions, apart from the possible appeal they might have had to individual palates, would also provide a source of energy and sustenance. Although the army was never a uniform entity, and culinary customs among the Roman forces cannot be standardised,⁵³ it is evident that a

new suite of flavourings from the Mediterranean and beyond “followed” the army, since widespread and measurable quantities of their remains appear for the first time in northwestern Europe already by the first stages of the conquest. What also seems clear is that an extra effort was possibly made, especially in the more politically unstable first phase of the Roman occupation in the north, to access products from “back home”,⁵⁴ such as several typical Mediterranean fruits and herbs like figs, grapes/raisins, coriander and fennel.

The ability to acquire, possibly through central provisions but also through personal transactions, familiar products that would not only taste but also smell of home may have acted as a perceived, often subconscious, emotional and physical support. “Foreign” products and food, as many anthropological studies have identified,⁵⁵ initially can feel bland and tasteless; thus herbs and spices are an easy way to achieve a sense of a stronger taste, closer to the familiar one. Eating habits are generally quite conservative and resistant to change. Atkins and Bowler, drawing on studies on immigrants, argue that diet is one of the last things to change even after the language of origin is abandoned: people of the first generation show reluctance in changing their traditional food habits even if certain foods are difficult to acquire, and even in second and third generations, where the level of assimilation is high, certain dishes are still present.⁵⁶

Food has a strongly mnemonic nature⁵⁷ and the combination of its smell, savour and sight evokes the senses and can generate emotions and memories.⁵⁸ Feelings of pleasure and comfort can therefore arise with the identification of a welcome, familiar stimulus, and condiments and spices especially, with their strong character and fragrance, could enhance such mnemonic sensory effects. As Hamilakis argues, bodily mnemonic practices are deeply ingrained and hence more difficult to be questioned, since they are normally subconscious.⁵⁹ The use of flavourings in these new lands could have thus contributed to subliminal feelings of security and temporary enjoyment.

But it is not only the flavour that can be of concern when one is away from the familiar. Perhaps more important is the strong association between food and medicine,⁶⁰ seen also in classical texts, such as those by Dioscorides and Theophrastus. Herbs and spices in particular were used as ingredients for medical concoctions but also as *theriaca* (antidotes to poison) and *thumiamata* (incenses) among other uses as suggested by Theophrastus;⁶¹ their presence was often sought out for the healing of the physical and spiritual individual.⁶² Indeed,

many modern sociological studies have shown medicinal value attached to the diet of the home country and the nostalgia and comfort that this evokes.⁶³ It is possible that similar factors were at play in the consumption patterns of certain people in the northern provinces.

I argue that such “tastes” of home not only gave consumers a feeling of familiarity and security, but they could have also reinforced and supported the development of a “taste of power”. At least initially, the taste experiences enjoyed by the army and the urban elite in the provinces, who considered themselves, and often were considered by the local populations, to be the political and military victors, thus also exemplified a certain status and prestige. These taste experiences, therefore, not only stimulated subconscious alimentary memories and their positive associations, but also through the accessibility and consumption of these extra foods combined comfort with strength. Within both the overall military structure and the urban communities in the provinces, tastes would have been shared, tried out and adopted by many in a process that contributed to the creation of distinct, powerful identities through, among others, their common culinary experiences, attitudes and practices.

Taste of Cosmopolitanism and Learned Diners

Of the new flavourings, some, like rue, aniseed and black cumin, never seem to have been widespread and adopted in the provinces. They were initially associated mainly with the army. In phase R2 they appeared in more site types but they never took off and almost never found their way to lesser rural sites (Figure 10.2). Some of the rare finds may represent attempts at local growing that proved to be relatively difficult in the northern climates and were perhaps abandoned in favour of other products. Preservation difficulties may add to the reduced archaeological visibility of some of them, but these cannot be solely responsible for the observed pattern.⁶⁴ The contextual analysis of plant remains indicates that members of the urban elite and Roman officers were among those who most commonly accessed and consumed several rare spices and fruits.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, as attested in the transactions recorded on the Vindolanda tablets,⁶⁶ lower-rank soldiers would also have accessed some of the archaeobotanically rare species, but there is little evidence to support a more widespread use. Notably, studies of the Roman ports of Myos Hormos and Berenike in Egypt suggest that

spices were carefully guarded and most of them, apart from black pepper, were in fact traded in small quantities.⁶⁷

Thus, it can be suggested that certain rare flavourings may have been associated with a sense of exclusivity and social aspirations, and perhaps more so in the northern provinces. Their rarity, however, also meant that very few people in this area would have experienced such flavours and aromas, and perhaps even fewer would have been aware of their existence. These flavourings seem to have been ingredients in the culinary regime of a very specific social domain; their meaning translated into a “language” spoken only by a few. Then such flavourings, full of connotations within a small group of people, if ever encountered may have simply been exotic curiosities for the larger part of the populace.

The social meaning of such flavourings among those few communicating in these alternate “languages” of taste is more difficult to tease out. Some of these were perishable products, such as pomegranates and other fruits, and their processing and transport needed special preparation and packing.⁶⁸ This would add extra costs to their transportation, preventing their bulk export, thus contributing to a sense of exclusivity when consumed in the provinces. Others were imports from faraway places, imbued with overtones of exoticism, daring and danger as implied by the long journeys necessary for their acquisition from across the seas and the inevitable legends that surrounded the unknown.⁶⁹ The costs and the availability of such flavourings would vary from year to year but texts can be of some help here, indicating generally high prices, with black pepper occupying their lower range.

Black pepper is actually one of the most frequently mentioned flavourings in Roman sources and features in most sauces in Apicius.⁷⁰ It was imported to Rome from Indian Malabar through the Red Sea ports;⁷¹ its presence is another testimony to the use of the newly discovered seasonal monsoons, the trade winds, which facilitated sailing in the open ocean and brought Rome, east Africa and India closer together than ever before. The stark rarity of black pepper in the northern provinces could be explained by its possibly restricted availability or by preservation issues. Black pepper may also have been imported in a ground form, which could have eased its transport. Cappers provides some arguments in favour of its possible unpulverised trade, drawing on references in Apician recipes of pounding pepper before its mixing with other ingredients and the better preservation of its flavour if transported as whole

peppercorns.⁷² Whether more common than the archaeobotanical finds suggest or not, black pepper seems to have been appreciated and valued in Rome. Prices for the different kinds of pepper are mentioned by Pliny the Elder, who also mentions attempts to adulterate it by mixing it with juniper berries “which absorb its pungency in a remarkable manner”, alluding to its attributed high value, although this was seemingly a rather common practice with spices.⁷³ Perhaps the record that best highlights the value and status attributed to pepper is the 3,000 pounds of pepper offered to Alaric along with 5,000 pounds of gold, 30,000 pounds of silver, 4,000 silk tunics, and 3,000 scarlet skins in exchange for calling off his siege of Rome in 408 CE.⁷⁴

However, black pepper’s significance may not lie as much in its cost as in its association with its place of origin. Parker suggests that at the time, goods of a perceived Indian origin, among which pepper is included, carried a sense of exoticism for the Romans; pepper brought a “taste of India” to Rome. He furthermore argues that Latin and Greek authors made an explicit link between India and luxury goods, regardless of their actual origins, creating an imaginative perception of India, and supporting the often generalising Roman connotations of the East as a land of luxury and ephemeral pleasure.⁷⁵ Pepper with its pungent, strong flavour was not a mere ingredient, another seasoning. Its relative “universality” in recipes, employed in both savoury and sweet dishes, may be another indication of its “exotic” taste. Pepper may have thus tasted of the imagined India and the East of the Romans just as the strongly fragrant incense sticks we burn nowadays smell of our imagined Orient, “consumed” in a framework of projections of leading a life of a certain attitude, philosophy or status.

Consumption of such eastern spices in the northern provinces may have had further connotations, extended to an additional link with Rome itself, as the mediator and facilitator between exoticism and the provinces: the prestigious and powerful Rome that created an Empire, extending across a large area of the known world. In a similar sense several other Mediterranean condiments, such as coriander and the fruits discussed above, although not exotic like the Indian spices, became more common in the provinces. Initially these may have brought an “air” of the Mediterranean, an “air” of cosmopolitanism, a “taste of Rome”, to those that tried them in the north.

Taste of a globalised world

Among the various flavourings introduced to the northern provinces, a group of true imports, which appear to have become quite common, stand out, with figs being the most prominent example. Figs are one of the most common finds in military sites and major towns, and in phase R2 occurrences also multiply in small towns and rural non-elite settlements. They are quite rare in rural elite sites and so far they have been found in very few rural lesser sites in phase R1 (Figure 10.2). Since fresh figs are difficult to produce in northern European environments, their widespread presence likely refers to remnants of the dried product. Dried figs had several advantages: they preserved well and lasted long, they could be easily packed for bulk transport, they provided condensed energy necessary for sustenance, particularly during long-distance journeys when food provisioning would not always be easily guaranteed, and added sweetness, improving the flavour of drinks and foods when mixed together following the culinary standards of the period. The presence and strong association of figs with sites that acted as distribution centres and focal market places, such as towns and military extramural settlements (Figure 10.2), highlight their tradable value. Their weak association with the rural elite can lead to questions about their potential luxury status in the northern provinces. Pliny and Columella also refer to the role dried figs played among the main dietary staples, and the latter also mentions it in conjunction with farmers' work in the Mediterranean, where they are combined, for instance, with other ingredients as a remedy for worms in calves.⁷⁶ It is, therefore, possible that the wider adoption of figs was instigated by its commercial and natural qualities. Originally they were perhaps, a trademark of affluent and diverse market stalls with products from various places or brought initially for the army, but soon they were "marketed" as an indulgent, rather affordable, sweet "urban" snack.

Other plant products of tradable value would have contributed in more indirect ways to new flavours and their associated tastes in the provinces. Pitch, the resin of pine trees, may be just such an example. Specialised industries of pitch production have been identified within the Empire, suggesting local intensification in its production for the purposes of the "global" Roman economy that stimulated its distribution to a remarkable scale.⁷⁷ Pitch was a widely used multi-purpose product in areas from cosmetics to construction, but most significantly, it was a common waterproof agent for containers, such as wooden casks, amphorae and *dolia*.⁷⁸ It is, therefore, possible that its widespread employment in containers for traded drinks and foods

over long distances, to the northern provinces in this case, may have contributed to the addition of resinous undertones in some of these products or a slightly resinous fragrance experienced when first opening the containers.

These are some examples to highlight how the diversified economy operating under one Empire instigated and facilitated the circulation of goods from different locales, and in so doing created the circumstances for the gradual permeation of new tastes and their associated perceptions of an ever-expanding world.

Conclusion

This chapter has showcased the potential of archaeobotanical studies to investigate how and why new tastes may have developed and spread in the Roman periphery and ultimately what these could have actually meant. In a contextualised approach, and drawing upon archaeological and textual evidence, different “tastes” have been identified in the world of the northwestern provinces of the Empire. These tastes, defined here as socio-culturally circumscribed experiences of flavours, were not independent of each other. They were simply different “ingredients”, adding to an increasing complexity of flavours, blending different experiential lines in the negotiation of identities within the expanding Roman world. Within this framework three “tastes” have been identified and explored, those of memory and power, cosmopolitanism and globalisation, tastes that could potentially overlap and mutually reinforce one another. What the evidence suggests is not a dramatic change in the diet of people, but a selective adoption of individual elements within specific contexts. Flavourings, with their fragrant attributes and their combinations in cuisine, would have played an important role in creating associations and connotations, especially as the increasing adoption of some of them for local cultivation would have altered not just the dining setting but also the living landscape, infusing both with new experiences and ideas about life.

¹The *Oxford Handbook of Food History* edited by Pilcher (2012) and the volume *Food: The History of Taste* edited by Freedman (2007) are excellent sources of inspiration that provide a wide range of approaches and a solid foundation for the study of food in general. Archaeobotanical work employing contextual approaches for the study of the dispersal of Roman food plants in the northern provinces includes Jacomet *et al.* (2002), Bakels & Jacomet (2003), Livarda &

- Van der Veen (2008) and Livarda (2011). For more regionally focused archaeobotanical studies with detailed insights into specific parts of the Roman provinces see, e.g., Wiethold (2003); Bouby & Marinval (2004); Van der Veen *et al.* (2008); Livarda & Orengo (2015).
- 2For example, Rozin and Fallon (1986); Mennel (1996); Conner and Armitage (2002); Wilk (2006).
 - 3Plant remains do not always survive well in the archaeological record, but when they do they reveal details relevant to various thematic studies. See chapters in this volume by Banducci ([Chapter 7](#)), Baker ([Chapter 8](#)) and Totelin ([Chapter 3](#)) for illustrations of how botanical remains help us better understand the ancient world.
 - 4See, e.g., Jacomet & Kreuz (1999); Van der Veen *et al.* (2007); Livarda (2011); Jacomet (2012).
 - 5For a sense of what these cooked food remains can tell us about Roman taste, see Banducci ([Chapter 7](#)).
 - 6For example, the fused mixture of fish, barley and peas, discovered at the Neolithic site of Çatal Höyük, see Bogaard *et al.* (2013: 121–2). See also the way that epigraphical remains can be brought alongside material remains to enhance our understanding of taste in Baker ([Chapter 8](#)), who brings the material remains in Pompeii together with literary sources.
 - 7See also Boulay ([Chapter 11](#)) on wine.
 - 8For an effective summary of sources see Parker (2002).
 - 9'Defining' taste in relation to the ancient world is, in part, what this volume seeks to do. Individual chapters attempt to define taste in relation to medical, oenological, literary or religious contexts in Greek and Roman culture.
 - 10For instance, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry (accessed 7 September 2015) for aniseed reports a "flavour that resembles that of licorice". Ancient sources are sometimes similar; Theophrastus, for example, in *Enquiry into Plants (De causis plantarum)* 6.7.5 describes Attic thyme as "like savory and very pungent".
 - 11Daly *et al.* (2012); Ikeda (2002); see also Baker ([Chapter 8](#)).
 - 12See, for example, Daly *et al.* (2012); Auvray & Spence (2008).
 - 13Small & Prescott (2005).
 - 14Auvray & Spence (2008) follow Gibson's (1966) ecological approach and review current cognitive neuroscientific findings.
 - 15See also Gowers ([Chapter 5](#)) on taste as a metaphor in Roman literary texts.
 - 16Most of the contributions in this volume refer to the varying perspectives on the relationship between taste and identity; see especially contributions by Banducci, Gowers, Rudolph and Caseau.
 - 17For example, see Zohary & Hopf (2000: 206); Kreuz (2004); Wiethold (2010).
 - 18For methodology see Livarda (2008a, 2011). Many thanks are due to all those archaeobotanists who shared their data and to Professor Van der Veen, who provided support as my thesis supervisor, when the bulk of the data collection was completed. This work (2004–8) was funded by an NERC grant awarded to Professor Van der Veen, and by the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation and the A. G. Leventis Foundation.
 - 19Cappers (2006).
 - 20Van der Veen (2011).
 - 21Watkins (1995: 427).
 - 22Livarda (2013).
 - 23Livarda (2013).
 - 24See Livarda (2011).
 - 25But always keeping in mind that some of these may be rare as a result of preservation issues.

- 26For a basic introduction to ancient recipe collections see Dalby (2003).
- 27A collection of recipes, possibly ranging from the early to the late Roman period. See Grocock & Grainger's 2006 critical edition for further information; see also Baker ([Chapter 8](#)).
- 28In his homemade sweets, *dulcia domestica*, Apicius 7.11.1 mentions, for instance, stuffed palms or dates with nuts and ground pepper, salted and fried in honey; on the inclusion of pepper in Roman recipes see also Baker ([Chapter 8](#)).
- 29For a discussion of Roman recipes and common flavourings see, for example, Grimm (2007).
- 30Apicius 7.11.5.
- 31Several examples exist throughout Apicius, such as 6.7–8, 7.1–10.
- 32Cramp *et al.* (2011).
- 33Cramp *et al.* (2011).
- 34See Atkins & Bowler (2001).
- 35See Bakels & Jacomet (2003: 554–5); Lowe (2010).
- 36Livarda (2008b: 79–80); Livarda & Orengo (2015).
- 37Bakels *et al.* (1997); Van der Veen (2008).
- 38Sykes (2009). For more on the “taste” for meat in ancient Greece and Rome, see MacKinnon ([Chapter 9](#)).
- 39Livarda & Van der Veen (2008).
- 40Livarda & Van der Veen (2008).
- 41See Livarda (2008a, 2011).
- 42Livarda (2008a, 2008b, 2011) and Livarda & Van der Veen (2008).
- 43The total number of sites is taken from a large database including more than 600 records with at least one introduced food plant (Livarda 2008a and updating since; see also Livarda 2011).
- 44Changes to consumption patterns are also found in diverse literary contexts. See Hitch ([Chapter 1](#)) on early Greek literature and Caseau ([Chapter 13](#)) on taste and consumption in late antique Christianity.
- 45Davies (1971: 123).
- 46See Jacomet *et al.* (2002); Livarda (2011).
- 47Those other than hamlets.
- 48Bakels & Jacomet (2003) focusing on rice, chickpea, bottle gourd, black pepper, almond, pine, date, olive, pistachio, pomegranate, fig, melon, garlic, peach, cherries, plums, apple, pear, walnut and grape. See also Jacomet *et al.* (2002).
- 49Bakels & Jacomet (2003).
- 50Such as black cumin and aniseed ([Table 10.1](#), [Figure 10.2](#)).
- 51Brothwell & Brothwell (1998: 161–2).
- 52For example, Grimm 2007; see also MacKinnon ([Chapter 9](#)) for the impact of marinades and vinegar on the taste of meat.
- 53For example, King (1999); Stallibrass & Thomas (2008).
- 54See also Banducci ([Chapter 7](#)).
- 55For example, Brown *et al.* (2010).
- 56Atkins & Bowler (2001: 273–4).
- 57See also Gowers ([Chapter 5](#)).
- 58See Hamilakis (1998, 1999, 2011).
- 59Hamilakis (1999).
- 60See also Totelin ([Chapter 3](#)).
- 61Parker (2002: 43).
- 62On spiritual aspects of taste in early Christian practice, see Caseau ([Chapter 13](#)); on the relationship of food and medicine see also Baker ([Chapter 8](#)).
- 63Jamal (1998); Atkins & Bowler (2001); Brown *et al.* (2010). See also Baker ([Chapter 8](#)) on the archaeological and textual evidence for notions of a healthy

diet in antiquity.

64Livarda (2011).

65Jacomet *et al.* (2002); Livarda (2011).

66Bowman & Thomas (1994: 135–8).

67Van der Veen (2011: 62).

68Jacomet *et al.* (2002).

69For instance, Herodotus, *Histories* 3.110 describes the perils of collecting cassia, which, he suggests, grows in a shallow lake with winged creatures guarding it; likewise at 3.111 cinnamon is said to come from the nests of birds on precipitous cliffs. For more on the relation between danger and taste in Greek and Roman literature, see Hitch ([Chapter 1](#)) and Gowers ([Chapter 5](#)).

70Grimm (2007: 97).

71Dalby (2002b: 88–94); Cappers (2006); Van der Veen (2011).

72Cappers (2006: 113). See also Solomon (1995).

73Pliny, *Natural History* 12.26–9. See also Parker (2002: 45).

74Zosimus, *New History (Historia nova)* 5.40–1.

75Parker (2002).

76Bakels & Jacomet (2003). For example, Pliny, *Natural History* 12.5, 15.34; Columella, *On Agriculture (De re rustica)* 2.21.3, 6.25.

77Orengo *et al.* (2013).

78Orengo *et al.* (2013). *Dolia* are large, wide-mouthed, oval ceramic containers for storage and transportation of goods.

Tastes of wine

Sensorial wine analysis in ancient Greece

Thibaut Boulay

νῦν γὰρ δὴ ζάπεδον καθαρὸν καὶ χεῖρες ἀπάντων
καὶ κύλικες· πλεκτοὺς δ' ἀμφιτιθεῖ στεφάνους,
ἄλλος δ' εὐῶδες μύρον ἐν φιάλῃ παρατείνει·
κρητὴρ δ' ἔστηκεν μεστός· εὐφροσύνης·
ἄλλος δ' οἶνος ἐτοῖμος, ὃς οὐποτέ φησι προδῶσειν,
μεῖλιχος ἐν κεράμοις, ἄνθεος ὀζόμενος·
ἐν δὲ μέσοις ἀγνὴν ὁσμὴν λιβανωτὸς ἵησιν.¹

Now the floor is pure; pure are the hands of all and the cups. Braided crowns are put on; phials filled with sweet-smelling perfumes are given as gifts. The krater stands, filled with the joy of the feasts. Other wine is prepared, proclaiming that it will not be lacking, sweet wine in amphoras, with the scent of flower. In the centre, rises the pure fragrance of incense.

The Presocratic philosopher and sympotic poet Xenophanes of Colophon (sixth century BCE), in his *Elegies*, gives a sensorial image of symposia and of wine-tasting in the Greek world,² introducing the three-part test to which the divine beverage was submitted: visual, olfactory and gustatory.³ In the Archaic period, wine-tasting in a banqueting context was already the subject of a precise ritual – the arrival of the water and the wine, the distribution of crowns and perfumes to the guests, the mixing and pouring of libations followed by consumption. However, the Greek language of wine was not fully articulated until the classical era, in the technical contexts set out by Empedocles (the theory of the elements) and Hippocrates (the theory of the humours and the temperaments).⁴ As Rudolph and Totelin have explored in their contributions to this volume, Greek philosophers and physicians were aware of and interested in the discriminatory power of the gustatory system as well as the interpersonal and interspecies differences in perception.⁵ The Greeks thus adopted and codified a specific vocabulary to express the different flavours (or at least the principal semantic markers) that were consistent with these

paradigms, and that is the focus of this chapter.⁶

Just as the humours in food laid the theoretical foundation for what physicians considered a balanced and healthy diet (discussed by Baker in [Chapter 8](#)), similar precepts also governed the consumption of wine. An indispensable food for the nutrients it provides, wine was frequently used therapeutically, and appreciation of it was intrinsically linked to its age, as well as the temperament and health of the drinker.⁷ In his lost treatise *On Wine*, the Greek physician Rufus of Ephesus, known to have lived in Alexandria and Rome in the first to second centuries CE under the emperor Trajan, bears witness to this, privileging a medical and dietary approach to wine over a hedonistic one:

I praise wine with a view to health more than any other thing, but he who drinks some needs wisdom, if he does not want to suffer some irremediable harm: for wine can develop heat, fill the body with strength, and digest food in all its parts; and there is no wine which is so bad that it cannot produce these effects; but there exist, in this domain as in all others, inferior qualities and superior qualities. Wine can also put the soul into a certain state, because it is the remedy (*pharmakon*) against sorrow, and in my opinion, it is that which Helen was pouring into the krater.⁸

Thus, the sensorial analysis of wine allowed one both to judge its intrinsic qualities and to evaluate its use from a dietary or therapeutic perspective. Doctors such as Erasistratus of Ceos⁹ (third century BCE) or Asclepiades of Bithynia (second to first century BCE), author of a lost work *On the Administration of Wine*, were among the first to establish a hierarchy of wine in the Greek and Roman world, paving the way for the next generation of theorists including Dioscorides (first century CE), Rufus and even Galen (second century CE).¹⁰

Before further analysing the vocabulary of wine consumers and producers, we will examine the characteristics of Greek wines, which bear little relation to wines consumed today, in order to appreciate more fully the range of semantic markers adopted by the ancients. The great wines, appreciated notably during aristocratic banquets, were mellow and obtained through natural concentration. These wines were often from Thasos, Chios, Tmolus or Maroneia and were distinguished from ordinary wines, which were for everyday consumption.¹¹ First-class wines were made from raisins, grapes dried on the vine or on racks, while second-class wines were made from grapes also harvested

at maturity which had not undergone any particular processing. Once poured into *pithoi*, the wines underwent an oxidative maturing process, with air present above the surface of the wine. At the end of the winter, when the temperature of the cellar rose, a thin layer of yeast would develop on the surface of the liquid that was in contact with the air. This layer, called the “flower” (*antheos*) of the wine, provided the characteristic aromas to which Xenophanes refers when he employs the expression “the scent of flower” (*antheos ozomenos*). These wines, in an oxidative atmosphere, thus had what we now refer to as analytical characteristics (demarcated by the presence of particular molecules, such as sotolon) and corresponding specific organoleptic qualities (aroma and finish), to which references can be found in the speeches of wine lovers. The most sought-after wines were the sweet wines (*glukeis*), which did not contain the highest alcohol content.¹² Lucian thus distinguished the *anthosmias*, the wine of masters, from new wine (*gleukos*, “the must”), which intoxicates.¹³ Thus, such wines were appreciated after they had been aged for several years, and displayed a black or very dark colour. In Aristophanes’ *Wealth*, the slave Cario, evoking the wealth of his master Chremylus, exclaimed enthusiastically: “the bin is full of white flour, the amphoras of black wine which smells good”.¹⁴

Vinification in an oxidative atmosphere influenced the colour of the wines. As they age, these wines become darker because an enzyme, tyrosinase, catalyses the oxidation of the pigments and the tannins, changing the colour of the juice and giving rise to dark golden tints.¹⁵ Because the Greeks did not generally practise the maceration of the must with the solid remains of the grapes after pressing (called the marc or the pomace), red wines such as we know them today did not exist.¹⁶ Thus, the visual perception that preceded and introduced the sensorial analysis allowed one not to determine the type of wine, but rather to appreciate its age. Lovers of mature wines, the Greeks were sensitive to time and to the ability of wines to age (*palaioō*), as well as to the changes in colours, in the consistency and in the aromas accompanying this.¹⁷

Galen and the organoleptics of wine

Galen appears to be a reliable guide for analysing Greek wine-tasting methods and for anticipating the remarkable continuity in Greek approaches to flavour. From classical Greece until the Roman era,

basic semantic descriptors are almost universal from Democritus onwards. Not only does Galen present himself as the heir to Hippocrates and to his method, the physician of Pergamon also appears to be very close to Aristotle, who emphasized the close relationship between medicine and that fundamental branch of philosophy that was physics. Moreover, Galen had a very important influence on his medical and literary contemporaries, since he appears as one of the learned banqueters in Athenaeus' fictional *Deipnosophists*. The influence of his work on later taste traditions is immeasurable¹⁸.

According to Galen, the organoleptic examination of wine included five steps:

ἔστι γὰρ αὐτῶν μία μὲν ἢ κατὰ τὰς χροίας διαφορά, δευτέρα δὲ ἢ κατὰ τὴν γεῦσιν καὶ τρίτη κατὰ τὴν σύστασιν καὶ τετάρτη κατὰ τὴν ὁσμὴν καὶ πέμπτη κατὰ τὴν δύναμιν.¹⁹

The wines distinguished themselves firstly by their colour, secondly by their flavour, thirdly by their consistency, fourthly by their smell, fifthly by their strength.

These steps, which determined Galen's catalogue, also structured the reference system in the Greek language for wine, marking its diversity (*diaphora*). In what follows, we will look at these five ways of demarcating the qualities of wine.

Wine according to sight

From the play of light, to the colour and consistency of wine, sight (*opsis*) provides the first sensory experience of wine. Galen attached great importance to sight,²⁰ and distinguished five colours of wine, which he classified, from the most to the least warming: yellow (*xanthos*), orange-tawny or amber (*kirros*, *purros* or *ōchros*), red (*eruthros*), sweet (*glukus*) or black (*melas*) and white (*leukos*). Galen also identified intermediary shades,²¹ but recognized that the taste test remained the most reliable and the most discriminating in determining wine's medicinal properties.²²

Although the visual perception of wine was first and foremost connected to colour, it also included the examination of the matter (*sustasis*) in, and the strength (*dunamis*) of, wine.²³ Aristotle indicated that a *glukus* wine is viscous (*glischros*),²⁴ and for Galen too, the visual attributes of wine, beyond tint and shade, were essential elements in

his examinations.²⁵ For example, colour intensity also established important distinctions. A wine that was *kapnias* had a weak intensity, ashy, dull and grey, like smoke;²⁶ such wines often figure in Athenian comedy.²⁷ By contrast, wines that were very black (*melantatos*), of a purple colour (*porphuros*), or fire-like (*aithops*), were characterized by their high intensity. Filtration, which had its supporters and its detractors,²⁸ allowed for the elimination of residues of all kinds, giving the eye wine that was pure (*katharos*). The “pure” designation should not be confused with wine that was undiluted (*akratos* or *aparachutos*). Colour intensity also determined wine’s transparency (*diaphanēs*), which along with the clarity (*diaphasis*), brightness or brilliance (*lamprotēs*) and purity (*katharotēs*) of wine, had an important influence on the way it was generally perceived. Thus, wines which were aqueous (*hudatōdēs*), transparent, clear, fluid and thin (*leptos*) were distinguished from a thick (*pachus*) or viscous wine. This examination allowed one to anticipate the flavours of a wine by looking at it. Galen thus decreed general rules: “a sweet wine is never exactly clear or brilliant to the eye”.²⁹

Wine according to taste

The technical categorization of flavour in antiquity, as Paulas discusses in the [next chapter](#), gives us insight into the ways taste terminology develops across Graeco-Roman culture. The scale of flavours (*chumoi*)³⁰ upon which wine consumers and producers relied when characterizing a wine generally centres around the mixing of two basic flavours, sweetness (*glukus*) and bitterness (*pikros*).³¹ A similar approach is also taken in relation to colours, which sit on a spectrum from black to white, and sound, which oscillates between high and low pitches. Aristotle, in particular,³² specifies that from sweetness one derives oiliness (*liparos*) and from bitterness comes saltiness (*halmuros*). There are, finally, the mixed or intermediary flavours: sharpness (*drimus*), acidity (*austēros*), astringency (*struphnos*), harshness and acidity (*oxus*).³³ As with the colours, these eight flavours are often reduced to seven by Plato,³⁴ Galen³⁵ and even by Aristotle himself (*On the Senses* 442a19–22), with oily being subsumed under sweetness.³⁶

This predominant system of reference for taste also corresponds to the medical theories regarding the elements, the elementary qualities and the four humours,³⁷ defined for the first time in the Hippocratic

treatise *On the Nature of Man* (Table 11.1). In the *Nabatean Agriculture*, a third-century CE compilation translated from Syriac into Arabic in the tenth century CE (*Al-filāḥah al-nabaṭīyah*), one finds a clear exposition of the correlations that were progressively established between flavours, elements and qualities. In a passage concerning the flavours of vegetables, the author is working fully within the Aristotelian tradition and in particular in line with the works of Theophrastus,³⁸ from whom he borrows nomenclature. Furthermore, this passage is consistent with the theoretical frameworks developed by Empedocles, resumed later by Hippocrates and Galen.³⁹ *Drimus* is the flavour of fire, a combination of heat and dryness; sweetness is the flavour of the air, a combination of heat and humidity; harshness the flavour of the earth, a combination of cold and dryness; bitterness, the flavour of water, a combination of cold and humidity.⁴⁰ The flavours of the four humours described by Galen (particularly in the treatise *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Human Body*) are also related to this system of concordances: yellow bile is acrid and biting, black bile is astringent and acid while blood has a sweet flavour, and phlegm is salty.⁴¹ Thus, sweet wine was considered an expectorant,⁴² and to wines having a certain acrid (*drimutēs*) quality, manifest warming properties were attributed.⁴³

Table 11.1 The Greek system of reference for taste

Pleasure scale	Greek flavours	Latin flavours	English flavours	Elements ^a	Humours ^b	Qualities ^c
Most pleasant 	γλυκὺς	<i>dulcis</i>	sweet	air	blood ^d	hot and wet
	λίπαρός	<i>pinguis</i>	oily, smooth			
	δριμύς	<i>acer</i>	acrid, pungent, sharp	fire	yellow bile	hot and dry
Least pleasant Unpleasant	αὐστηρὸς	<i>austerus</i>	astringent			
	στρυφνός	<i>acerbus</i>	harsh	earth	black bile	cold and dry
	ὀξύς	<i>acidus</i>	acid, sour			
	ἄλμιυρός	<i>salsus</i>	salty	water ^e	phlegm	cold and wet
	πικρὸς	<i>amarus</i>	bitter			

Notes

aHippocrates, *On the Nature of Man* 4–8 (6.38–53 Littré).

bGalen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Human Body* 5.4 (3.351–77 Kühn).

cGalen in *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato* (*De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis*) 8.4 (De Lacy (1981: 502, 18–22)); *Nabatean Agriculture*, fols. 111–15, see Fahd

(1973: 322–8).

dAccording to Galen in *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato (De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis)* 8.4 (De Lacy (1981: 502–4, 22–4)) blood is constituted of a balanced mixture of the four elements. See Mahé & Jouanna (2004: 565 and n.58). The correspondence between blood and air arises only after Galen.

eSeawater is thus salty and bitter (Aristotle, *Meteorology* 354b1–3). However, the nature of water is to be flavourless, *achumos* (Aristotle, *On the Senses* 441a3).

Sweetness was not the only quality sought by wine tasters. Sweetness, in fact, is agreeable in limited measure, just as a musical chord, when resulting from what is mixed (*miktos*) according to a determined relationship is more harmonious (*mallon ... sumphōnia*).⁴⁴ Sweetness is the foodstuff *par excellence*, but it is too rich if ingested alone,⁴⁵ other flavours had to be added to it. Mixed flavours that procure pleasure are, like musical chords,⁴⁶ constituted according to the numerical relationships that characterize them,⁴⁷ akin to the Pythagorean theory of musical chords or intervals.⁴⁸ Moreover, Hippocrates compares the tongue to a musical instrument: “when the tongue is very much in harmony, the chord produces pleasure; but when it is not in harmony, there is displeasure”.⁴⁹ In the same way that the secret of a musical chord lies in the numerical relationship (*logos*) and in mixing (*mixis*), the fixed proportions for the mixing of wine and water took on a primordial importance for the Greeks, who thus favoured, for their drinks, proportions of fifths (3/2), fourths (4/3) and octaves (2/1).⁵⁰

The harmonious combination of mixed flavours is the guarantee of the stability (*monimotēs*) of the wine (that is to say, the stability of proteins, pigments and microbiological elements). Amongst these, those procuring pleasure were astringent (*austēros*) and sharp (*drimus*), while harsh (*struphnos*) and acid (*oxus*) flavours are, by contrast, unpleasant.⁵¹ Herbaceous wines are thus classified among the very astringent (*stuphoteroi*).⁵² When Galen the oenophile prevails over the doctor,⁵³ he includes only the pleasant flavours to evoke the palette of wines: “According to flavour, wines can be classified as sweet or astringent, with, of course, a median term between the two poles, which does not have a distinct quality. As well as these, there are wines that combine these two flavours, and finally, there is the flavour known as *drimus*.”⁵⁴ Thus we see that when Galen is speaking of the taste qualities of wine in particular, he gives both a qualitative analysis of the flavour and a hedonistic evaluation.

The Aristotelian approach to taste, which intentionally utilizes both multimodal semantic descriptors and analogies with musical chords

and harmonious combinations, attests to a keen consciousness – whether latent or manifest – of the interdependence of different senses. Indeed, such an approach seems to be a component of taste analysis from the Archaic period onwards. When read in conjunction, the writings of Aristotle and Galen, although several centuries apart, bear witness to a genuine perceptual coherence between different sensory experiences. However, these shared semantic descriptors made it difficult to distinguish between the gustatory qualities and intensity on the one hand, and the hedonic parameters or preferences on the other. Thus, to the confusion between the sensory modalities of taste, smell and somaesthesia (sensory perception of bodily feelings) was added a confusion between the tastes themselves and their hedonic character.

Wine according to consistency

The tongue allows one to appreciate flavours, but also – according to Galen’s valuable distinction – the consistency (*sustasis*) of the wine tasted.⁵⁵ Here, it is a question of anticipating the matter, the elements from which the wine is composed. He suggests that “according to the consistency, wines can be differentiated between aqueous and fluid, or quite thick, with, of course, a median term between these two categories, which does not have a distinct quality, and once again, all those which are intermediary between the median and the extremes”.⁵⁶ The markers on the Aristotelian scale of flavours can be found in Democritus and Empedocles, who, according to Aristotle, turned all the senses into “objects of touch”.⁵⁷ Despite his criticism of this approach, Aristotle used the same nomenclature, also found in Plato,⁵⁸ even using, on occasion, metaphors for the properties of matter, asserting, for example, that sweet wine is *leantikos*, “good for lubricating”.⁵⁹ If Aristotle considered that the atomists, and Democritus foremost amongst them, reduced the five senses down to the single sense of touch, their doctrine conveyed, above all, the high sensitivity the Greeks had for somaesthetic information perceived via the tongue. Democritus, *apud* Theophrastus, thus indicated that “acid is an angular form, with numerous bends, small and subtle; thanks to its mobility, it quickly spreads everywhere, while the acidity resulting from the angles contracts and tightens, in such a way that empty spaces are produced and the body heats up; for, that which is

emptiest heats up the best”.⁶⁰ In the passage, Democritus provides a physical explanation for the heating action of the *drimutēs*. The semantic analysis of the markers of gustatory space reveals a real confusion between the different sense modalities.⁶¹ However, these multimodal semantic markers, such as *liparos* (smooth and oily), *drimus* (acrid and sharp), *austēros* (dry and astringent or harsh and rough), or *oxus* (sour and acid) are the faithful reflection of the interaction between these gustatory perceptions and the texture of foods, and of the impression that the gustatory, olfactory and somaesthetic information cannot be separated.⁶² Although Democritus’ atomist theories were sharply criticized by Aristotle, the latter took up the same multimodal semantic markers to qualify his eight flavours. In the context of wine-tasting, this vocabulary was then enriched and developed, always in the same way, as evidenced by the works of Athenaeus of Naucratis.

In the specific domain of tangible sensations, the tongue⁶³ thus identifies wine textures, including light (*kouphos*), delicately constituted wine,⁶⁴ strong (*sklēros*) wine,⁶⁵ which procures the impression of hardness in the mouth because of excess tannins or acidity, mellow (*malakos*) wine,⁶⁶ as well as dry (*xēros*) wine,⁶⁷ which lacks consistency, vivacity and character, and “dessicative” (*xērantikos*) wine,⁶⁸ which leaves the mouth dry because it lacks body and matter. The tongue also is capable of detecting thick (*pachus*) wine, with a rich constitution, or finally, warm (*thermos*) wine,⁶⁹ whose high alcohol content procures a sensation of heat in the mouth. The vocabulary used shows again that the appreciation of wine in the mouth involved tactile sensory modes such as thermal perception and perception of volume and texture in addition to taste, in order to characterize wine more fully.

Wine according to smell

The Greeks, noting that the olfactory and gustatory modalities were physiologically associated, made use of the same semantics. Aristotle indicated that there is an analogy between the types of flavours and smells, but, “the odours not being quite as fully evident as the flavours, it is from the latter that the former derive their names”.⁷⁰ This is why the expert analysis of smells remains subordinate to the gustatory analysis. Galen also concedes, “saying that something has a sour or sharp, astringent or harsh, or salty or bitter smell, is not the

same as for flavours, but we refer only to two qualifiers and speak of good (*euōdē*) or bad (*dusōdē*) smells”.⁷¹ It is rare to see olfactory perceptions characterized in reference to taste, although it sometimes occurs, as in the case of *Tainiōtikos* wine, originating from the Tainia region along the coast between Alexandria and Canopus, which has slightly astringent aromas.⁷² Theophrastus⁷³ is even more categorical than Galen, asserting that “smells cannot be classified into types; they are distinguished as pleasant or not”.⁷⁴ Plato also distinguishes only two types of smells, pleasant (*ēdus*) and unpleasant (*lupēron*).⁷⁵ A fragment from Archestratus’ *Life of Luxury* indicates thus that the *Bibline* wine is more *euodes* than that from Lesbos.⁷⁶ The Greek debate on the types of smells and the difficulty of establishing a particular semantics for smells manifestly arose out of the empirical observation that the olfactory organ perceives two types of organoleptic properties directly. First, smells are perceived orthonasally by direct olfaction prior to introducing a substance in the mouth; we usually refer to these as smells. Olfactory experience, however, also occurs retronasally (i.e. internal perception through the back of the mouth cavity). This perception occurs once a substance has been introduced into the oral cavity. Molecules are released in the mouth which travel back up towards the nasal cavity and stimulate the nerve cells which cause the perception of what we refer to as aromas.⁷⁷

Quite often, drinkers are satisfied, therefore, in emphasizing the fine fragrance of a wine (*euosmos*), in contrast to wines that are odourless (*aosmoi*).⁷⁸ Sometimes, however, these observations are more developed and give details about the aromas identified. Hermippus, the fifth-century BCE Athenian comic, making fun of the ostentatious identifications of wine, stages Dionysus vaunting a rotten (*saprias*) wine. The god mocks drinkers who rely too much on inspiration and are badly educated in the art of wine-tasting, saying, “One can smell the violets! One can smell the roses! One can smell the hyacinths!”⁷⁹ Although jokingly presented in this comic episode, it seems, nonetheless, that the most informed noses made a distinction between varietal aromas. These varietal aromas are today qualified as “primary” aromas, since they come directly from the grape berry.⁸⁰ But such varietal aromas are often neglected in favour of fermentative (or secondary) aromas⁸¹ and – especially – aromas linked to the ageing process (known as tertiary aromas) that allow the wine both to acquire a bouquet (in Greek signified by the terms *euosmia* or *euodia*) and to reveal the characteristics of the soil the grapes were grown on (like the Egyptian *Tainiōtikos*). The Greeks connected this evolution of

aroma to the loss of volume resulting from maturation in the amphoras: “wine also improves and increases in odour, especially when the aqueous element separates from it. All these things (that is to say, fenugreek and wine) consequently become more aromatic when maturing.”⁸²

As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, Xenophanes of Colophon did not fail to indicate that the wines which were most appreciated gave off a “scent of flower” (*antheos ozomenos*). In the observations of philosophical and medical authors, we can access a range of semantic descriptors that were derived from other intuitive sensory data in order to describe smells and aromas. These terms convey an awareness among our authors of the intermodal treatment of sensory information. Among wine lovers, recourse to comparisons with odours and aromas stored in their sensory memories would also have been an essential component of their taste experience, one which we cannot fully grasp.

Wine according to strength (*dunamis*)

The bouquet was not a decisive criterion for appreciating and distinguishing wines. For example, in the mouth (*pinomenos*, literally “drinking”), Arcestratus preferred wine from Lesbos (*Lesbios*) to the Phoenician *Byblinos*, even though the bouquet of the latter was superior.⁸³ The mouth allowed for the evaluation of the *dunamis*, a term which refers, at the same time, to a wine’s consistency, structure, richness (referring to the dry matter content, which gives an impression of density and of strength), and to its alcohol content. The strongest is qualified as winey (*oinōdēs*) and the lightest as watery (*hudatōdēs*).⁸⁴ Since consistency (*sustasis*) refers to the wine’s matter, to the qualities that determine its development and ability to age (also referred to as the wine’s potentiality), a wine’s *dunamis* is more connected to its period of maturity, when its character and properties have been fully reached. On this reading, the *dunamis* is linked to the concentration prior to harvesting. Florentinus (a Bithynian agronomist writing in the third century CE) indicates that “if the vine bears few grapes, it will make a strong wine, because these grapes alone will have absorbed all the nourishment and all the strength (*dunamis*)”.⁸⁵ The time factor in the development of wines⁸⁶ made a difference to the strength of a wine.⁸⁷ Just as for the development of the bouquet of the wine, the Greeks connected the development of a wine’s strength

to the differential evaporation that accompanied its ageing.⁸⁸ Moreover, the Quintilii brothers from Alexandria Troas (second century CE), important statesmen during the Antonine era and authors of an agricultural treatise, indicate that the strongest wine (*ischuroteros*), that is to say, the one that has more matter (*sustasis*), could be stored in the open air, unlike light wine (*leptos*).⁸⁹ The appreciation of the *dunamis* of a fully aged wine, as André Tchernia asserts, arises as a result of the evaluation of its *drimutēs* (pungency), which increases with time and results from the effects of differential evaporation, like alcohol in the wine.⁹⁰ Sensitivity to burning and sharpness (such as the experience of biting down on a chilli, what neurological researchers have called trigeminal sensitivity),⁹¹ had, at this time, a very concrete translation in the Greek language.

The Greek vocabulary very early on became enriched with intersensorial, spatial, but also anthropomorphic metaphors, to categorize the consistency (*sustasis*) of wine. Lacking specific descriptors, the expression of sensory information had to call upon not only sensory analogies, but also the imagination. This is why tasters resorted to metaphorical processes to express the most subtle nuances. A delicate and aqueous (*hudatōdēs*) wine, which is lacking in alcohol content and in body, is qualified as soft (*trupheros*),⁹² weak (*asthenēs*)⁹³ or tender (*hapalos*).⁹⁴ Similarly, the adjective “light” (*kouphos* or *leptos*) is rarely laudatory.⁹⁵ However, this is not a universal opinion. According to Athenaeus’ character “Galen”, *leptos* Mamertine wine, although low in alcohol qualifies as vigorous (*eunos*) and pleasant to drink (*hēdus*).⁹⁶ He also indicates that a young wine, like Surrentine, which has not exceeded the age of twenty-five years, is characterized by an absence of smoothness (*alipēs*) and the presence of hardness, linked, perhaps, to an excess of acidity (with the adjective *psapharos*).⁹⁷

Unlike wine that is weak and lacking in nutrition (*atrophos*),⁹⁸ potent (*dunamikos*) wine is nourishing. Particularly rich in dry matter, it was qualified as thick or plump (*pachus*)⁹⁹ or even as “fleshy” (*sarkōdēs*)¹⁰⁰, benefiting from a generous alcohol level and procuring a sensation of density, strength and warmth (the *aithops* wine of Homer is both dark in colour and glittering). Other anthropomorphic metaphors were frequently deployed: a wine that possessed the potential to become *dunamikos* was then qualified as “robust” (*ischuros*).¹⁰¹ Warmer and more nourishing, the old rich wines could be diluted with more water.¹⁰² Black wine, if it is not the warmest, is nonetheless qualified as having “a most powerful effect”

(*dunamikōtatos*), reputed to remain in the body of drinkers for a longer period of time.¹⁰³

Conclusion

Sensitive to the gustatory powers of discrimination and to interpersonal differences in perception, educated Greek thinkers developed a specific vocabulary to express the different flavours, or at least their principal semantic markers (that is to say, the eight flavours as defined by Aristotle, and for which the multimodal characteristics have been pointed out). Empedocles and Hippocrates were among the first to introduce these characteristics/semantic markers into their conceptual frameworks.¹⁰⁴ Clarified and enriched by medical writers from the classical era onwards, the Greek language of wine presents a sophisticated system with detailed semantic descriptors, including thermal and tactile terms that demarcate somaesthetic sensitivity, retronasal olfaction and trigeminal sensitivity. The steps in wine-tasting set out by Galen correspond, moreover, to the multimodal nature of the sense of taste: flavour analysis is accompanied by close attention to the consistency (*sustasis* or somaesthetic sensitivity), to the aroma or smell (*osmē*, orthonasal and retronasal olfaction) and to the strength (*dunamis*, trigeminal sensitivity and alcohol content) of wine. Although the medical and dietary considerations occupy an important place in wine-tasting, they do not override appreciation of its hedonic character.¹⁰⁵ Galen thus paid as much attention to the taste of wines (thus allowing for medical applications) as he did to wine's therapeutic virtues. Throughout, however, he maintains a marked predilection for Falernian wine.

Finally, one must not forget the fact that wine was the product of a region, a certain type of soil, a microclimate, of availability of water. Relying upon the authority of Empedocles, the Greek physician Aretaeus of Cappadocia (second century CE) explained the organoleptic differences existing between different wines by what one could now call *l'effet terroir* (the expression or effect of the soil): "The differences in flavours comes from the variety in the nourishing earth, from which the plants draw different homoeomeries (or simple elements); it is the same for the vines, as it is not the difference in the plant, but that of the earth, which makes good wine."¹⁰⁶ Aretaeus agreed with Hippocrates, who, as far as he was concerned, insisted upon the role water (or the hydric factor) plays in *terroir*: "observe

how neighbouring localities differ amongst themselves in the sweetness of the wine, even though the sun has the same strength in all of them: it is that here, there is the humidity in the soil that makes the wine pleasant, but which does not exist in the soil over there”.¹⁰⁷ Benefiting from markers indicating the gustatory space which referred at once to a continuum of flavour and to the different sensations perceived by the sensorial receptors of the oral cavity, the Greek wine-tasters had semantic tools at their disposal which were adapted to take into account the diversity (*diaphora*) of wines and to put into words the expression of the soil, if necessary, by borrowing the laudatory epithets of Homer.¹⁰⁸

It is a pleasure for me to thank Kelli Rudolph for her invitation to contribute to the present volume, giving me the opportunity to continue reflections on wine-tasting in antiquity begun in Wilkins & Nadeau (2015).

- 1Xenophanes DK 21 B1 = Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 11.462c. Athenaeus is a Greek rhetorician and grammarian writing at the end of the second and beginning of the third century CE. On the Presocratics and taste see Rudolph's introduction to this volume and [Chapter 2](#). All translations from Greek are mine unless otherwise noted.
- 2On ancient wine-making see Tchernia & Brun (1999) and Boulay (2012); on modern methods, see Ribéreau-Guyon *et al.* (2012a, 2012b); on the multisensory aspect of wine-tasting, see Peynaud (1980). This chapter offers some answers to Jean-François Revel's ([1979] 1982: 4–5) question concerning ancient wine appreciation quoted by Mark M. Smith in the conclusion of his stimulating essay, *Sensing the Past* (2007: 124): “what did a meal, a wine *taste like* in the third century before or after Christ? And *what sort of taste* did the guests have?”
- 3On the nature of this banquet, which could be the meeting of a philosophical *thiasus* of Elea, see the study and French translation by Defratras (1962). See also the oenological commentary on B1 in Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 11.462c by Kourakou-Dragona (1999: 74–9). On *symposia* see Murray (1983a) and (1983b).
- 4On taste and ancient medicine, see Totelin ([Chapter 3](#)); On the properties of the four humours, see Baker ([Chapter 8](#)).
- 5See Theophrastus, *On the Senses (De sensibus)* 63; on which see Rudolph's discussion in [Chapter 2](#).
- 6For the medieval period, see the essential contribution of Grieco (2009).
- 7Jouanna (1996).
- 8Rufus of Ephesus in Oribasius, *Medical Collection* 5.7.1–3 (quoted by Jouanna (1996)): οἶνον ἐπαινῶ μὲν πρὸς ὑγείαν ὥς οὐδὲν χρῆμα ἄλλο, δεῖ δ' ἐπιστήμης τῷ πίνοντι, εἰ μέλλοι μηδὲν ἀνήκεστον πάσχειν· οἶνος γὰρ δύναται ἀνάψαι μὲν τὸ θερμόν, ἰσχύος δ' ἐμπλῆσαι τὸ σῶμα, πέψαι δὲ τὴν τροφήν δι' ὅλων· καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδεὶς οἶνος οὕτω κακός, ὥστε μὴ ἂν ποιῆσαι τὰ εἰρημένα, ἔνεστι δὲ κάνταῦθα, ὥσπερ ἐν τοῖς ἄλλοις, τὸ χεῖρον καὶ τὸ ἀμεινον. δύναται δ' οἶνος καὶ τῇ ψυχῇ διάθεσιν τινα παρασχεῖν· τὸ γὰρ τῆς λύπης φάρμακον οἶνός ἐστι, καὶ μοι δοκεῖ ἡ Ἑλένη εἰς τὸν κρατῆρα τοῦτο ἐμβαλεῖν. The final phrase of the passage is an allusion to Homer, *Odyssey* 4.219.
- 9Pliny, *Natural History (Historia naturalis)* 14.73.

- 10See Tchernia (1997).
- 11See the general remarks by Bresson (2007: 128–34), which distinguish ordinary and quality wines.
- 12Sweet wine is often mistakenly thought to have higher alcohol content; see, for example, Villard (1988: 445).
- 13Lucian, *Saturnalia* 22.
- 14Aristophanes, *Wealth* 807: οἱ δ' ἀμφορῆς οἴνου μέλανος ἀνθοσμίου. One finds these very words in a fragment from Pherecrates, *Miners* (= Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 6.269b). Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon* 2.2.2, reminds us that before men learned the art of viticulture from Dionysos, there was no wine, “neither black wine nor wine that smells good” (οὐ τὸν μέλανα τὸν ἀνθοσμίαν). In Longus, *Daphnis and Chloe* 1.28.1, the Tyrean pirates land on Lesbos and take away *anthosmias* (οἶνον ἀνθοσμίαν), a great quantity of wheat and honey. There is no support for the hypothesis found in Dalby (2003: 13), s.v. *Anthosmias*, that the term designates wine mixed with seawater (*tethalassomenoi*). Dalby cites Aristophanes, *Frogs* 1150, *Wealth* 807 and Phainias of Eresus (= Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.31f.) in support of his claim. However, if as Xenophon (*Hellenica* 6.2.6) reports, the Spartan mercenaries of Mnasiippus, who, after the breach of the peace of 373 BCE, landed at Corcyra “a territory which is quite well cultivated and planted, with sumptuous dwellings and well-stocked wine storehouses in the country” and after pillaging it, “did not want to drink anything other than *anthosmias*”, it was precisely because this “floral bouquet” was a luxury wine, a wine for aging, and not a wine for everyday consumption, which is what the *tethalassomenoi* wines were.
- 15See Ribéreau-Gayon *et al.* (2012b: 428–33).
- 16See, however, the analysis by Kourakou-Dragona (2013: 103–19), which identifies the vatting methods.
- 17Galen, *Concerning Hippocrates' On Regimen in Acute Disease* (*In Hippocratis De victu acutorum*) 3.1 (15.628 Kühn).
- 18The Aristotelian and Galenic traditions mingle harmoniously in the treatment of flavours in the Jabiran corpus or in the *Book of Treasures* of Job of Edessa, an important translator of the works of Galen from Greek into Syriac at the beginning of the ninth century AD (*Speech* III, 1–2 in Mingana (1935: 122–9)). For the Galenic tradition in medieval Europe, see, in particular, Grieco (2009).
- 19Galen, *Concerning Hippocrates' On Regimen in Acute Disease* 3.1 (15.626–7 Kühn).
- 20Boehm (2002).
- 21Galen, *Concerning Hippocrates' On Regimen in Acute Disease* 3.1 (15.627 Kühn).
- 22Galen, *Concerning Hippocrates' On Regimen in Acute Disease* 3.1 (15.633 Kühn: “colour, in itself, has no beneficial or harmful action”). See Béguin (2002).
- 23On the powers (*dunamis*) of natural substances, see Totelin ([Chapter 3](#)).
- 24Aristotle, *Problems* (*Problemata*) 872b30–5.
- 25Boudon (2002).
- 26See Kourakou-Dragona (2013: 145–57).
- 27For examples in comedy roughly contemporary to Aristophanes see Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.31e (Plato Comicus) and 6.269d (Pherecrates).
- 28See Plutarch, *Table Talk* (*Quaestiones convivales*) 6.7.1 (692b–e).
- 29Galen, *Concerning Hippocrates' On Regimen in Acute Disease* 3.2 (15.632 Kühn: γλυκύν δὲ οἶνον οὔτε λεπτὸν ἀκριβῶς, οὔτε λαμπρὸν ὄψει).
- 30In addition to the phrase κατὰ τὴν γεῦσιν, Galen also employs the expression κατὰ τὴν γευστικὴν, “according to the gustatory faculty” (*Concerning Hippocrates' On Regimen in Acute Disease* 3.2 (15.631 Kühn)).
- 31Totelin ([Chapter 3](#)) highlights the importance of these two basic flavours for botanical and pharmacological writers.

- 32Aristotle, *On the Soul* (*De anima*) 422b10–14.
- 33See also Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* (*De causis plantarum*) 6.1.2. The mono-dimensional *continuum* of flavours defined by Aristotle can be represented by means of a single axis (Table 11.1; see also Table 3.1); the arrow in the table refers to hedonistic appreciation.
- 34Plato, *Timaeus* 65c–67c, on which see Rudolph (Chapter 2), Paulas (Chapter 12) and Totelin (Chapter 3). Cf. Alcinous (or Albinus) of Smyrna, *The Handbook of Platonism* (*Epitome doctrinae Platonicae sive Διδασκαλικός*) 19 in the edition by Louis (1945).
- 35For example, see Galen, *On the Mixing and Powers of Simple Remedies* (*De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis et facultatibus*) 1.37 (11.445 Kühn); *On the Diseased Parts* (*De locis affectis*) 2.6 (8.87–8 Kühn), where the following are distinguished: astringent (αὑστηρός), harsh (στυφνός), acid (στυφός employed here to mark the difference with sharp, ὀξύς), acrid (or biting, δακνώδης), salty (ἄλμυρός), bitter (πικρός) and sweet (γλυκύς). In Galen's *Concerning Hippocrates' On the Nature of Man* 1.6 (15.40 Kühn) the eight Aristotelian flavours can be found.
- 36See in particular Aristotle, *On the Senses* (*De sensu*) 442a17: smooth is a sweet type of flavour, ὁ μὲν οὖν λιπαρὸς τοῦ γλυκεοῦ ἐστὶ χυμὸς. See also Paulas (Chapter 12) on flavour lists in the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions and see Table 3.1 for ancient flavour lists and their ordering.
- 37For more on Galen, Hippocrates and taste see Baker (Chapter 8).
- 38See Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* (*De causis plantarum*), 6. Fahd (1973: 319 n.5) notes “l'influence du grec est telle que l'on peut se demander si, avant de passer en syriaque, les éléments composant notre compilation n'avaient pas été rédigés en grec”.
- 39See Galen in *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato* (*De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis*) 8.4 (in De Lacy (1981: 502, 18–22)).
- 40Beyazit Umumi 19053 (Beyazit Devlet Kiitiiphanesi, Istanbul), 111r–115v. See Fahd (1973), who presents the existing analogies with the *Book of Treasures* by Job of Edessa. See also Clements (2013).
- 41Galen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Human Body* 5.4 (3.351–77 Kühn) (3.356 Kühn on the δριμύτια of yellow bile and 3.361 Kühn on black bile). In this passage, the δριμύτια of yellow bile is strongly asserted, therefore I am retaining this correspondence. In Galen's commentary *Concerning Hippocrates' On the Nature of Man* 1.30 (Kühn 15.79), the correspondence between bitterness and yellow bile was provided by the Hippocratic passage itself (*On the Nature of Man* 6–7 = 6.44–51 Littré). Vindicianus' *Letter to Pendadius* in the edition by Rose (1894: 485–92) uses the Latin adjectives *amara*, *igne*a and *sicca* to qualify yellow bile. On this text and its Greek model, see Jouanna (2005).
- 42Galen, *Concerning Hippocrates' On Regimen in Acute Disease* 3.2 (15.635–6 Kühn).
- 43Galen, *About Antidotes* (*De antidotis*) 1.3 (14.14–15 Kühn).
- 44Aristotle, *On the Soul* 425a27–b7; cf. Kucharski (1954). Totelin (Chapter 3) explores the complex list of properties associated with flavours.
- 45Aristotle, *On the Senses* 442a 9–12.
- 46Aristotle, *On the Soul* 426a27–b7.
- 47Aristotle, *On the Senses* 442a16–17.
- 48See also Kucharski (1954).
- 49Hippocrates, *On Diet* (*De dieta*) 1.18 (6.492 Littré): καλῶς δὲ ἡρμοσμένης γλώσσης, τῇ συμφωνίῃ τέρψις, ἀναρμόστου δὲ λύπη; cf. Demont (2004).
- 50Bertier (1972: 71–3).
- 51On the power of flavours, see Baker (Chapter 8).
- 52*Geoponica* 6.11.2 indicates that one should avoid pressing the leaves with the

- grapes to avoid the wine becoming στυφότερος.
- 53Boudon (2002).
- 54Galen, *Concerning Hippocrates' On Regimen in Acute Disease* 3.1 (15.627 Kühn): ἡ δὲ κατὰ τὴν γεῦσιν διαφορὰ τῶν οἴνων εἰς γλυκὺν καὶ αὐστηρὸν τέμνεται καὶ δηλονότι κἀνταῦθα τὸν ἀμφοῖν μέσον, ὃς οὐδετέραν ἔχει σαφῆ ποιότητα, καὶ πρὸς γε τούτοις τὸν ἐξ ἀμφοτέρων τῶν ποιότητων σύνθετον, ἔτι τε τὸν δριμὺν ὀνομαζόμενον. See Tchernia & Brun (1999: 40–5) on the δριμύτης.
- 55See also Télo ([Chapter 4](#)) on mouth-feel metaphor in Matro.
- 56Galen, *Concerning Hippocrates' On Regimen in Acute Disease* 3.1 (15.627 Kühn): ἡ δὲ κατὰ τὴν σύστασιν διαφορὰ τῶν οἴνων εἰς τε τὸν ὑδατώδη καὶ λεπτὸν καὶ εἰς τὸν πᾶνυ παχὺν τέμνεται, καὶ δηλονότι καὶ εἰς τὸν μέσον τούτων, εἴτ' αὐθις ὅσοι μεταξὺ τοῦ τε μέσου καὶ τῶν ἄκρων εἰσί.
- 57Aristotle, *On the Senses* 442a29–b24. See Rudolph (introduction to this volume and [Chapter 2](#)) on philosophical theories of taste.
- 58Plato, *Timaeus*, 65c–67c.
- 59Aristotle, *Problems* 872b35. On the sense of touch in Aristotle, see Freeland (1992).
- 60Theophrastus, *On the Senses* 65: τὸν μὲν οὖν ὁξὺν εἶναι τῷ σχήματι γωνοειδῆ τε καὶ πολυκαμπῇ καὶ μικρὸν καὶ λεπτόν. διὰ γὰρ τὴν δριμύτητα ταχὺ καὶ πάντῃ διαδύεσθαι, τραχὺν δ' ὄντα καὶ γωνοειδῆ συνάγειν καὶ συσπᾶν, διὸ καὶ θερμαίνειν τὸ σῶμακενότητας ἐμποιοῦντα.
- 61Coutier (1994, 2007).
- 62Astringency is thus a tactile sensation, notably caused by tannins, tannic acid having the effect of reducing lubrication and increasing friction in the mouth. Democritus' explanation (Theophrastus, *On the Senses* 65: τὸν δὲ στρυφνὸν ἐκ μεγάλων σχημάτων καὶ πολυγωνίων καὶ περιφερὲς ἤκιστ' ἐχόντων) suggests that “harshness is composed of large figures that are very angular and as little rounded as possible”. This has, unexpectedly, been confirmed in a certain way, in recent studies that demonstrated that the astringency of wine is due, notably, to polymeric flavan-3-ols (proanthocyanidines), which are large enough to be able to precipitate lubricating proteins, according to Thorngate (1997) and Lesschaeve & Noble (2005).
- 63Galen, *On the Diseased Parts (De locis affectis)* 2.6 (8.87–8 Kühn) speaks more precisely on the sensations possessed by the tongue.
- 64Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.26e, 27b.
- 65Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.30c.
- 66For example, Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.29f., 32b. See Skoda (2003: 80) on the ambiguities between sweetness and softness.
- 67For example, Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.32d.
- 68Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.26c.
- 69For example, Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.32c.
- 70Aristotle, *On the Soul* 421a30–b1. On the sense of smell in Aristotle, see Cappelletti (1977) and Johansen (1996). See also Baltussen (2015).
- 71Galen, *Concerning Hippocrates' On the Humours* 1 (16.214 Kühn). See Boehm (2003) and Totelin (2015a).
- 72Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.33e: ἀρωματῶδες ἡρέμα ἐπιστῦφον.
- 73Theophrastus, *On the Senses* 85. See Sharples (1985); Johansen (1996); Wörhle (1988); Baltussen (2015).
- 74See also Galen, *Concerning Hippocrates' On Regimen in Acute Disease* 3.1 (15.627 Kühn): “from the perspective of smell, wines can be differentiated to the extent that some have a good smell, others do not, but have rather a violent and unpleasant smell; others do not have any at all and are odourless, like water”

(καὶ ἢ κατὰ τὴν ὁσμὴν δὲ διαφορὰ τῶν οἴνων, καθ' ὅσον οἱ μὲν εὐώδεις εἰσὶν, οἱ δ' οὐκ εὐώδεις, ἀλλὰ πλεηκτικὴν τινα καὶ ἀηδῆ ποιότητα κέκτηνται, τινὲς δ' οὐδ' ὅλως ἔχουσιν ὁσμὴν, ἀλλ' εἰσὶν ὥσπερ ὅτρητα κέκτηνται, τινὲς δ' οὐδ' ὅλως ἔχουσιν ὁσμὴν, ἀλλ' εἰσὶν ὥσπερ ὕδωρ ἄοδμοι.)

75Plato, *Timaeus* 67a.

76Olson & Sens (2000), fr. 59, with Dalby (2002c: 224–5). Archestratus was a Sicilian Greek poet of the mid-fourth century BCE.

77On the analogies between smells and flavours and the nasal organ, see Johansen (1997: 226–50), who does not deal with the question of retronasal olfaction. On aromas, see also Classen *et al.* (1994: 13–50).

78See Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 6.16.5 on sweet, odourless wines, and Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.32b on the wine from Heracleia (σκληρὸς καὶ εὐοσμος) and that of Erythreia (μαλακὸς καὶ ἄοδμος).

79Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.29e: ὄζει ἴων, ὄζει δὲ ῥόδων, ὄζει δ' ὑάκινθου.

80For example, on the varietal characteristics of *pramnios* wine and of *byblinos* wine, see Kourakou-Dragona (2013: 15–41).

81For example, Hermippus, in Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.29e, specifies that wine from Thasos, in its first years, has a scent of apple. This is common in the case of wines kept in an oxidative atmosphere, under a thin layer of yeast, because they give off ethanol. See Kourakou-Dragona (1999: 122–4).

82Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 6.14.10. See also Diophanes of Nicaea, an agricultural writer of the first century BCE, in *Geoponica* 7.3.2.

83Olson & Sens (2000), fr. 59.

84Galen, *Concerning Hippocrates' On Regimen in Acute Disease* 3.1 (15.628 Kühn).

85Florentinus in *Geoponica* 7.1.5: ἐὰν ὀλίγας σταφυλὰς ἢ ἄμπελος ἐνέγκῃ, δυνατώτερον τὸν οἶνον ποιεῖ, ἅτε τῆς τροφῆς καὶ δυνάμεως πάσης εἰς ἐκεῖνον μόνον τὸν καρπὸν καταναλωθείσης.

86Galen, *Concerning Hippocrates' On Regimen in Acute Disease* 3.1 (15.629 Kühn): ὁ χρόνος διαφορὰν ἐν τοῖς οἴνοις.

87Galen, *Concerning Hippocrates' On Regimen in Acute Disease* 3.2 (15.630ff. Kühn) indicates, moreover, that only aqueous and light wines (οἱ ὕδατώδεις καὶ λεπτοί) can be drunk beneficially when they are young.

88On this phenomenon, see Tchernia & Brun (1999: 139–45).

89Quintilii in *Geoponica* 7.2.1–2. According to Diophanes (*Geoponica* 7.3.2) old wine (ὁ παλαιὸς) is warmest (θερμότατος), strongest (δυναμικώτατος) and best smelling (εὐωδέστατος). The qualifiers *ischuros* or *krataios* refer to the rawness, the strength and the intense characteristics owing to the richness of the composition of a wine.

90Tchernia & Brun (1999: 139–45). Galen, *About Antidotes* 1.3 (14.14–17 Kühn) specifies for each type of wine its period of maturity before the δριμύτης gives way to the πικρότης, which indicates the deterioration of the wine, which has become undrinkable. See the analysis by Jacques (1996).

91Faurion (2000).

92Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.27c.

93Florentinus in *Geoponica* 6.2.3 or Galen, *Concerning Hippocrates' On Regimen in Acute Disease* 3.1 (15.628 Kühn). Galen, *De probis pravisque alimentorum succis* (*On the Good and Bad Juices of Foods*) 11 (6.806 Kühn) indicates that these weak wines do not travel well.

94Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.27c.

95Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.27b–c. One can also use the adjective ἔκλυτος, cf. Florentinus in *Geoponica* 7.1.4: “the grape grown in hot regions produces a more stable wine (τὸν οἶνον μονιμώτερον); that which comes from other

regions, or regions where the soil is infertile, produces a wine without strength (τὸν οἶνον ἐκλυτον)”.
96Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.27d.
97Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.26d.
98Florentinus in *Geoponica* 6.2.3 evokes the regions which produce wine that is “weak, light and not very nourishing” (ἀσθενῆ καὶ λεπτὸν καὶ ἄτροφον τὸν οἶνον).
99One finds, in Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.33a–b the expression τὸ παχὺ τῆς δυνάμεως attributed to the guest, “Galen”.
100Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.27c.
101Galen, *Concerning Hippocrates’ On Regimen in Acute Disease* 3.1 (15.628 Kühn).
102Homer, *Odyssey* 9.197, cf. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.26b. Steeped wine (ὁ ὕδαρῆς) is less warm, see Aristotle, *Problemata* 871a23.
103Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.26b.
104See Boulay (2015a).
105On the position of wine in the *Deipnosophists* of Athenaeus, see Brock & Wirtjes (2000).
106Diels & Kranz (1952), fr. A70/1 (= Aetius 5.26.4 = Diels (1879: 438)): τὰς δὲ διαφορὰς τῶν χυμῶν <παρὰ> παραλλαγὰς τῆς <γῆς> πολυμερείας καὶ τῶν φυτῶν γίνεσθαι διαφόρως ἐλκόντων τὰς ἀπὸ τοῦ τρέφοντος ὁμοιομερείας ὥσπερ ἐπὶ τῶν ἀμπέλων· οὐ γὰρ αἱ διαφοραὶ τούτων χρηστὸν τὸν οἶνον ποιοῦσιν, ἀλλ’ αἱ τοῦ τρέφοντος ἐδάφους. See Totelin ([Chapter 3](#)) on the way plants gain potency. From a technical point of view, on the importance of the *terroir* in the choice of viticultural methods, see Boulay (2015b).
107Hippocrates, *On Diseases (De morbis)* 4.34 (7.546 Littré): σκέψασθαι ... ὁκόσον χῶρος χώρου κάρτα πλησιάζων διαφέρει ἐς τὴν ἡδυσινίην τοῦ ἡλίου ὁμοίως ἐξαρκέοντος· ἔνθα μὲν γὰρ τῆς γῆς ἰκμάς ἐστὶν ἥτις τὸν οἶνον ἡδὺν παρέξει, ἔνθα δὲ οὐ.
108See Arnould (2002).

Tastes of the extraordinary

Flavour lists in Imperial Rome

John Paulas

Preceding chapters, particularly those of Totelin, Baker and Boulay, have naturally explored the centrality of flavour in Galen's (129–216 CE) extensive writings on medical treatment and diagnosis, while Gowers has mapped the metaphorical language of taste and flavour in Roman literary texts. This chapter turns instead to the textual practices of Roman authors of technical literature – philosophical commentaries, medical diatribe, natural history and lexicography – to understand how they explore the world of flavour in weird and wonderful ways. In offering lists of flavours and flavour elements, the authors of the first through early third century CE in this chapter render flavour a matter of engaging with textual traditions through contemporary writing practices that emphasized novelty and paradox rather than a matter of describing and accounting for a strictly gustatory experience.

The intellectual outlook of the authors discussed in this chapter fits neatly into tendencies assigned to, but by no means exclusively the province of, the so-called “Second Sophistic”, a period of intense public intellectualism arising in the Greek-speaking Eastern Mediterranean, which reached its zenith during the second century CE.¹ In particular, such authors position their writing through the quotation of or reference to earlier canonical figures such as Homer and Plato as well as authoritative but competing textual traditions (e.g. epic, natural philosophy, horticulture, botany, or pharmacology). In negotiating their relationship to these textual traditions in their public orations, writings and private conversations, the great wordsmiths of this Second Sophistic set themselves apart from their rivals by emphasizing, in their words, all that was novel, weird, wonderful, paradoxical and unexpected.²

Such tendencies were not simply part of a Second Sophistic proper;

earlier Roman authors writing in Greek and Latin exhibit the same interest in the extraordinary.³ For this reason, the scientific speculations of an earlier natural historical author outside of the Second Sophistic, Pliny the Elder, feature prominently in this chapter. Pliny's emphasis on cataloguing, in Latin, the marvels of the natural world through flavour in his *Natural History* foreshadows the exuberant flavour-writing of Second Sophistic authors. In Pliny, wonder and paradox feature prominently to generate an account that even includes a flavour with "no-flavour element" (*nullus ... sucus*, 15.108). The consciously novel way of writing about flavour analysed in this chapter reaches dazzling heights in the work of Julius Pollux (fl. 150–200 CE), an intellectual esteemed by the second-century Roman intellectual-political establishment but underrepresented in modern scholarship.⁴ In his treatment of the tongue and flavour in his *Onomasticon*, a manual of Greek vocabulary for properly understanding and reproducing the archaizing language central to Second Sophistic rhetorical and scholarly practice, Pollux captivates readers with his literary imagination, reaching heights of lyricism and creativity completely unexpected in a technical treatise.

Flavour and flavour elements

Within the framework of the perception of flavour (Greek *geusis*, Latin *sapor*, *gustatus* or *gustus*), Latin and Greek texts identify generic "flavour elements", a concept derived from words etymologically meaning "juice" or "sap" (Greek *chumos/chulos*, Latin *sucus*).⁵ Although these flavour elements include what modern science would categorize as basic "tastes", such as salty, sweet, sour and bitter, sensations now understood to be produced by the chemical detection of particular substances,⁶ there is no consistent and direct correspondence between the ancient flavour elements and modern tastes. Moreover, there is no ancient division between the modern multisensory experience of "flavour" and the more limited chemical experience of "taste". Rather, "flavour elements" comprise a limited number of qualities (salty, sweet, tannic, bitter, etc.), usually conceived of as "differences" (Greek *diaphorai*) or "types" (Greek *eidos*, *genos*, Latin *genus*) and of greater number and variety than basic modern tastes.⁷

While there could be as many flavours as there were things that could be tasted,⁸ attempts to limit enumerations of flavour elements

were common. In line with a longstanding philosophical textual tradition of flavour enumeration, groups of around seven or eight basic flavour elements occur in second-century CE Greek-language philosophical handbooks and commentaries on Plato and Aristotle. Galen observed similar sets of nine or ten basic flavours in his versions of pharmacological and natural philosophical textual traditions. Pliny’s important Latin-language treatment of taste in the first century CE provides a list of thirteen flavours that covers similar flavour territory as these Greek texts with the addition of three flavours Pliny considers remarkable.⁹ Finally, the lexicographer Julius Pollux offers twelve flavour terms in his idiosyncratic list, but ultimately he builds on the same set of basic flavour terms as his predecessors.

Greek-language philosophical texts of the second-century CE outline discrete sets of basic flavour elements following Platonic and Aristotelian textual traditions.¹⁰ The Platonic tradition of the period, best exemplified by Alcinous’ second-century ce *Handbook of Platonism* (*Didaskalikos*), is ultimately derived from a discussion, not a list,¹¹ of the sources of flavours in Plato’s *Timaeus* 65b4–66c7 and offers seven “differences” of flavour elements (19.4; see [Table 12.1](#)).¹²

*Table 12.1*Alcinous’ Platonic flavours, *Handbook of Platonism* 19.4, second century CE

Order	Greek flavour	English flavour/ effect	Compare
1	γλυκύς (<i>glukus</i>)	sweet, naturally spreading moisture around the tongue	Plato, <i>Timaeus</i> 66c7
2	ὀξύς (<i>oxus</i>)	sour, rending, tearing	Plato, <i>Timaeus</i> 66b7
3	στυφνός (<i>struphnos</i>)	contracting the pores of the mouth	Plato, <i>Timaeus</i> 65d3
4	αὐστηρός (<i>austēros</i>)	contracting the pores (less violent than <i>struphnos</i>)	Plato, <i>Timaeus</i> 65d4
5	δριμύς (<i>drimus</i>)	heating, going up one’s nose	Plato, <i>Timaeus</i> 66a1
6	ἅλμυρός (<i>halmuros</i>)	salty, briny (mildly detergent)	= ἅλυκά (<i>halukos</i>) Plato,

		and cleansing,	<i>Timaeus</i> 65e3
		less violent than	
		<i>pikros</i>)	
7	πικρός (<i>pikros</i>)	bitter (violently	Plato, <i>Timaeus</i>
		detergent and	65e1
		solvent)	

Note: λιπαρός (*liparos*), “oily” is not considered a different flavour.

Alcinous, rehearsing this Platonic tradition, isolates the sweet (*glukus*) flavour element as different from the rest because it naturally disperses the tongue’s moisture, whereas the others act in a variety of opposite, violent ways.¹³ *Oxus* (sour, acidic) flavours churn and rend; *drimus* (hot, pungent, peppery) flavours overheat and go up one’s nose; *pikros* (bitter) and *halmuros* (briny, salty) respectively act as liquifiacients and detergents to greater and lesser degrees; and, in a similar comparison, *struphnos* (tart, unripe) and *austēros* (tannic) contract the pores, the former more, the latter less (*Handbook of Platonism* 19.4).

Although Alcinous’ flavours are generally in line with those discussed in Plato’s *Timaeus*, noticeable elements of a complementary and authoritative Aristotelian textual tradition enter by way of allusion to Theophrastus in the specific language used to describe sweetness.¹⁴ Such eclecticism, as we shall continue to see, is typical of the texts under scrutiny, but it does not detract from important divisions upheld between intellectual traditions. The emphasis in Alcinous’ Platonic flavour theory on the formal uniqueness of sweetness and the relationship of the other flavours to it is firmly rooted in the Platonic textual tradition, found first in Plato’s *Timaeus*.¹⁵ This Platonic emphasis on sweetness also left no room for one additional flavour connected to sweetness in ancient texts that finds a place in the Aristotelian tradition: oily (*liparos*).

In his *On the Soul* (*De anima*), Alexander of Aphrodisias (late second/early third century CE) offers such an Aristotelian flavour list of eight elements that includes oily (*liparos*). As an Aristotelian list, it employs opposition and mixture as its guiding principles (see [Table 12.2](#)).¹⁶ Alexander distinguishes among eight types (*eidōs*) of flavours in which two, *glukus* (sweet) and *pikros* (bitter), serve as simple (*haplous*) flavours opposed to each other with the other flavour elements falling in between as mixtures (55.8–11). As mixtures of *glukus* and *pikros*, *liparos* (oily) is closer to *glukus*, while *halmuros* (salty, briny) is closer to *pikros*. In turn, between *liparos* and *halmuros*,

as mixtures themselves of these two mixtures, are the rest: *drimus* (hot, pungent), *austēros* (tannic, drying), *struphnos* (tart, unripe, astringent) and *oxus* (sour). Different from Alcinous' list in only one term, Alexander's list includes *liparos* (oily) as a flavour. This makes for eight terms, as many as Aristotle or Theophrastus list when they wished to keep oily (*liparos*) separate from sweet (*glukus*).¹⁷

Table 12.2 Alexander of Aphrodisias' eight Aristotelian flavours as mixtures, *On the Soul* 55.7–14, late second/early third century CE (cf. Aristotle *On the Senses* 442a17–19 and Theophrastus *On the Causes of Plants* 6.1.2)

Order	Simple Greek flavours	Complex Greek flavour mixtures	English flavours
1	γλυκύς (<i>glukus</i>)		sweet (simple flavour, opposite = <i>pikros</i> , bitter)
3		λιπαρός (<i>liparos</i>)	oily (mixture of simple flavours closer to sweet than bitter)
5		δριμύς (<i>drimus</i>)	hot, pungent (complex mixture situated between <i>liparos</i> and <i>halmuros</i>)
6		αύστηρός (<i>austēros</i>)	tannic, drying (complex

			mixture situated between <i>liparos</i> and <i>halmuros</i>)
7		στρυφνός (<i>struphnos</i>)	tart, unripe, astringent (complex mixture situated between <i>liparos</i> and <i>halmuros</i>)
8		όξύς (<i>oxus</i>)	sour (complex mixture situated between <i>liparos</i> and <i>halmuros</i>)
4		άλμυρός (<i>halmuros</i>)	salty, briny (mixture of simple flavours closer to bitter than sweet)
2		πικρός (<i>pikros</i>)	bitter (simple flavour, opposite = <i>glukus</i> , sweet)

But Aristotelian enumerations were more fluid so as to make

various perceptibles, such as colours and flavours, match in number. Sweet and oily or grey and black could be combined simply for the sake of numerical consistency in the analysis of perceptibles.¹⁸ Elsewhere in his flavour speculations, Alexander accepts Aristotle's remixing of flavours to generate seven types and even takes one step further by remixing flavours and colours to obtain six types each.¹⁹ The Aristotelian emphasis on mixture allowed for great flexibility in enumeration of generic types of perceptibles.

Platonic seven- or Aristotelian eight-flavour enumerations become standard for other texts positioning themselves within or rehearsing these traditions. For example, working within the Aristotelian question-and-(multiple)-answer genre of *problemata* and *aitia*,²⁰ Plutarch's *Natural Questions* 5 begins: "Why of the flavours (*chumos*), which are eight in type (*genos*), do we see only the salty (*halmuros*) not produced in any fruit?"²¹ A distinction between the seven Platonic and eight Aristotelian flavours (with the separation of *liparos* from *glukus* carefully maintained for the Aristotelian flavour lists) persisted to the time of the Suda, a voluminous historical dictionary of the tenth century CE. The author of the Suda,²² with an eye to the odd position of grey in the ancient colour chart, details the relationships among various colours and flavours, laying out Aristotelian, Galenic and Platonic ideas. The Suda offers an explanation of the discrepancy in number, claiming that Plato thinks of oily (*liparos*) and sweet (*glukus*) as ultimately the same because Plato labels unctuousness (*to hupaleiphon*) with the flavour element name *glukus* when it has a pleasantness (*hēdutēs*) of flavour to it and *liparos* if it does not. Yet with this explanation the Suda mixes up the tradition about mixtures in a strange way; the explanation that the Suda attributes to Plato has no traceable origin in his corpus. It is Aristotle, after all, who explains this seven-flavour configuration in *On the Senses*, not Plato. However, it is clear that the textual tradition eliding *liparos* and marked as Platonic was firmly established by at least the second century CE.²³

The language of medicine: Galen vs. Lycus

A product of his time, the doctor Galen occasionally appears to be more concerned with displaying his knowledge of the textual tradition and linguistically differentiating the traditional flavour vocabulary than focusing on the sensory perception of or medical reasoning about flavour. His emphasis on analysing the history of the Greek language

of flavour terminology places his speculations firmly within the context of a Second Sophistic obsession with prescriptive language based on ancient authority.²⁴ This tendency is evident in Galen's conscious, but textually unsupportable, effort to trace historical uses of the term *chumos* (flavour) as a specific word for flavour distinct from *chulos* (juice/sap/liquid). When Galen draws out the distinction between *chumos* and *chulos* fully, he traces the difference in orthography between two groups of ancients, with Theophrastus, Aristotle and fourth-century BCE Athenian physician Mnesitheus on the one hand, and, on the other, Attic (from Athens and its countryside) and Ionic (west coast of Asia Minor) Greeks, Hippocrates, Plato, and fifth- and fourth-century BCE Athenian comic playwrights.²⁵ Both groups, in Galen's analysis, used *chumos* to describe flavour, while Plato and the Attic and Ionic Greeks did not use *chulos* as a specialized term for juice but *chumos* for both juice/sap and flavour. Such a distinction seems not to have applied in Greek in Galen's time. Although Alexander of Aphrodisias, probably a contemporary of Galen, uses *chumos* to describe flavours, Alcinous the author of the handbook on Plato, who probably lived before Galen,²⁶ uses *chulos*.²⁷ As for earlier authors, there is not enough evidence to show that Galen is correct, and it is to be suspected that he is not; contrary to Galen's observation, Plato appears to have used *chulos* to mean "sap" in his *Critias* (115a), although Plato appears also to have used *chumos* to mean the same in his *Timaeus* (60a). The passage in Galen's treatise simply shows Galen to be the second-century CE intellectual he was, interested in ancient texts and upholding a distinction of language based on a reconstructed ancient usage.

Galen's *Against Lycus*, a diatribe against a rival medical expert, shows just how ingrained the tendency to invent semantic distinctions through ancient texts was in thinking about taste in Roman authors.²⁸ Galen offers two distinct lists of flavours. One list, of nine terms, he attributes to the first-century CE pharmacological author Dioscorides of Anazarba and those who have written pharmacological treatises (*ta peri hulēs hupomnēmata*, 220); the other, of ten terms, he attributes to natural philosophers (*phusikoi*, 221; see [Table 12.3](#)). The latter list resembles the Aristotelian list because it contains the term oily (*liparos*). For Galen, a key difference between the two categorizations of taste properties of substances is related to textual practice; his emphasis is on genre, pharmacological (*peri hulēs*, 221) versus natural philosophical (*para tois phusikois*) texts, and on citing an authoritative and illustrious predecessor. Moreover, Galen marks out the genre of

the natural philosophical textual tradition with the term *zētēsis* (inquiry, 221), which probably refers here to the Aristotelian textual tradition of *phusika zētēmata* (inquiries about nature). Galen’s list of flavours from natural philosophical inquiries almost certainly refers to an expanded version of the Aristotelian eight-flavour list, the same tradition Plutarch’s *Natural Questions* rehearses.²⁹ Since Galen’s pharmacological list elides *liparos*, as the Platonic lists do, and his natural philosophical lists adhere to the Aristotelian tradition, we can see that Galen’s lists represent both of the dominant philosophical traditions of flavour writing.

Table 12.3Galen’s pharmacological (*peri hulēs*) and natural philosophical (*phusikos*) flavours, *Against Lycus* 18a.220–2 (Kühn), second century CE

Pharmacological		Natural			
flavour	philosophical	flavour			
substances	differences				
(diaphorai)					
Order	Greek	English	Order	Greek	English
	flavours			flavours	
1	ἄλυκά	salty	1	γλυκύς	sweet
	(haluka)	ones		(glukus)	
2	ἄλμυρά	salty	2	ὀξύς	sour
	(halmura)	ones		(oxus)	
3	πικρά	bitter	3	δριμύς	hot,
	(pikra)	ones		(drimus)	pungent
4	γλυκέα	sweet	4	πικρός	bitter
	(glukea)	ones		(pikros)	
5	αὐστηρά	tannic	5	ἄλυκός	salty
	(austēra)	ones		(halukos)	
6	στρυφνά	unripe	6	ἄλμυρός	salty
	(struphna)	ones		(halmuros)	
7	στύφοντα	contracting	7	στρυφνός	unripe
	(stuphonta)	ones		(struphnos)	
8	δριμέα	hot,	8	αὐστηρός	tannic,
	(drimea)	pungent		(austēros)	drying
		ones			
9	ὀξέα	sour	9	στύφων	contracti
	(oxea)	ones		(stuphōn)	
			10	λιπαρός	oily

Galen's lists of nine and ten flavours, however, contain more terms than the basic Platonic and Aristotelian lists of seven and eight flavours because they contain synonymous or variant terms. Although the presence of these flavour synonyms possibly reflects Galen's sources, in all probability it represents a Galenic proliferation of flavour language for its own sake, even in contradiction to Galen's own understanding of flavour. Although pharmacological texts by Dioscorides survive, no list of flavours similar to Galen's exists for us to compare. An explanation for the additional terms of Galen's expanded lists of flavours can, however, be found within Galen's *oeuvre*.

The *Against Lycus* lists of flavours use three terms (*stuphōn*, *struphnos* and *austēros*) for the normally two-term (*struphnos* and *austēros*) unripe/tannic flavour group and both terms for salty (*halukos* and *halmuros*) rather than one or the other as in other lists under discussion in this chapter. Galen discusses all these terms elsewhere in his work and does not consider them to be distinct. In *On the Properties of Foodstuffs*, Galen sees *stuphōn* (contracting) as merely the higher-level generic category that embraces two standard terms of flavour *struphnos* (unripe/astringent) and *austēros* (drying).³⁰ In that text, Galen also regards *halukos* (salty) and *halmuros* (briny) as synonymous:

Salty (*halukos*) means nothing else besides briny (*halmuros*); one thing is meant by both. Likewise, the common type (*genos*) of unripe (*struphnos*) and tannic (*austēros*) is called contracting (*stuphōn*).³¹

Galen's *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* provides an explanation of the expanded terms of the lists found in *Against Lycus*. Galen's use of both terms for salty in the *Against Lycus* lists and his inclusion there of what he regards as the higher-level category of "contracting" (*stuphōn*) alongside the more specific types *austēros* (tannic/drying) and *struphnos* (unripe/astringent) suggest that Galen is simply deploying language he knows for flavours and is not interested in condensing the list along the lines of his own reasoning in regard to sensory perception. There appears to be a conscious choice made by Galen to honour the traditional differences of Greek vocabulary even though these differences run contrary to his gustatory outlook.

In Galen's *Against Lycus* lists, distinctions in flavour vocabulary win the day over sharp sensory distinctions. Galen's consistent inclusion of the generic category *strophōn* (contracting) with its members *austēros* (tannic) and *struphnos* (unripe, tart) and listing of *halukos* and *halmuros* as different types of flavours (*chumoi*) show the complexities that arise when this period's obsession with textual tradition creeps into treatments of flavour. Elsewhere in Galen, historical linguistic research and observations, such as his *chumos* (flavour)/*chulos* (juice) distinction, show just how important creating and maintaining distinctions in vocabulary, in the name of tradition, could be in the milieu of the Second Sophistic. At times in Galen's work, the importance and force of words simply overpowers and obscures medical reasoning and understanding.

Wonder, paradox, and flavour: Pliny

In Galen's work, the emphasis on the textual tradition and on the importance of language over physical experience or observation was central to understanding taste; however, for writing about the wondrous, marvellous and paradoxical in relation to taste we must go back chronologically to a century earlier and the work of Pliny the Elder.³² In a passage in Book 15 of his *Natural History*, Pliny enumerates thirteen common types of flavours in a list that exhibits remarkable creativity. Elsewhere in his work, Pliny uses *sapor* (taste, flavour) to describe flavours specific to various edibles as distinctive in themselves, for example, the flavour of pepper (*sapores piperis*, 12.120.1), the flavour of juniper (*sapores iuniperi*, 12.67), or the flavour of the medlar fruit (*sapores mespili*, 15.68).³³ But Pliny, of course, is not committed to allowing every tasteable thing to have a separate flavour. A passage from Pliny's discussion of fruits and fruit juices offers a substantive and idiosyncratic enumeration of flavours:

While we are on the topic, there are to be perceived thirteen types of flavours (*sapores*) that are common to both fruits and all flavour elements (*suci*): *dulcis* (sweet), *suavis* (mild), *pinguis* (oily), *amarus* (bitter), *austerus* (tannic), *acer* (hot, sharp, piquant, pungent), *acutus* (fresh, vegetal), *acerbus* (unripe), *acidus* (sour) and *salsus* (salty).³⁴ In addition to these there are three types of really amazing nature: one in which many flavours are tasted at once, as with wines; in them are the tannic (*austerus*), fresh (*acutus*), sweet (*dulcis*) and mild (*suavis*) flavours, all of which do not properly

belong to them alone. Another is the type in which there is both a flavour that does not properly belong to the substance but also something that is its very own and not belonging to others, as in milk, since there is in it that which cannot rightly be called sweet, oily or mild, a prevailing blandness, which itself takes the place of a flavour. Next, there is no flavour [sc. *sapor*] for water and no flavour element (*sucus*), but nonetheless by this very fact something in terms of flavour comes to be and constitutes its very own type.... It is remarkable that three of the basic elements of nature are flavourless, odourless, and without flavour elements (*suci*): water, air and fire.³⁵

Pliny's list begins with a simple ten-item list of standard flavours before moving on to three featured miraculous flavours. Textual traditions of flavour writing are visible in all of Pliny's flavours as the elements in the lists mostly overlap with the flavours one can find in other authors. One can see from a comparison with the Greek lists already discussed that many of Pliny's flavours are Latin versions of Greek flavour terms and, in one case, a Greek loanword, *austerus* (tannic; see Table 12.4).³⁶ Furthermore, even Pliny's miraculous flavours have some basis in earlier textual traditions.³⁷ As we shall see, Pliny's treatment of those flavours as wondrous paradoxes of nature that are difficult to explain shows us Pliny's unique touch.

Table 12.4Pliny's thirteen common flavours (*sapores*) and flavouring elements (*suci*), *Natural History* 15.106.1–108.7, first century CE

Order	Latin	English
1	<i>dulcis</i>	sweet
2	<i>suaui</i> s	mild
3	<i>pinguis</i>	oily
4	<i>amarus</i>	bitter
5	<i>austerus</i>	tannic, drying
6	<i>acer</i>	hot, pungent
7	<i>acutus</i>	fresh, herbal, woody
8	<i>acerbus</i>	unripe
9	<i>acidus</i>	sour
10	<i>salsus</i>	salty

Pliny's three
flavours of
“wondrous

nature”
(*mirabilis*
natura)

11	<i>unum in quo plures pariter sentiantur</i>	“one in which several other flavours are perceived equally” example: wine is <i>austerus</i> , <i>acutus</i> , <i>dulcis</i> and <i>suaui</i> s
----	--	--

(later in Pliny, *vinosus* “winey”)

12	<i>et alienus quidem, sed et suus quidam ac peculiaris</i>	“a flavour that does not properly belong to the substance but also something that is its very own”
----	--	--

example: blandness (*lenitas*) of milk, which serves in place of a
flavour

13	<i>nullus sucus</i>	“no flavour element”
----	---------------------	-------------------------

example: water (later, *aquatilis* “watery”)

Before we proceed to Pliny’s miraculous flavours, Pliny’s use of the term *acutus* merits special attention because it does not have a clear equivalent in lists of the earlier Greek and Latin traditions. In Pliny, *acutus* is used in olfactory description, where it describes the scent of apples (*Natural History* 15.110) and is connected with woody scents (15.52). As a flavour term, *acutus* occurs several books later to describe thyme and savory (*cunila*, 19.186).³⁸ Pliny calls other plants such as parsley and fennel *acuti*, but he appears again to be describing a flavour distinct from olfaction because their fragrance is signalled separately (*acuti et odorati*, 19.186). To add to the difficulty, although there is clearly some difference for Pliny between *acer* and *acutus*, perhaps pungency (*acer*) as opposed to a fresh, herbal brightness of

flavour (*acutus*), the exact distinction is by no means clear. For example, Pliny catalogues the herb savory (*cunila*) both in a list of *acer* flavours alongside the flavours of mustard and oregano and, almost immediately after, in a list of *acutus* flavours with thyme.

Given the importance of the *acutus* flavour to garden herbs, lost horticultural texts may be Pliny's ultimate source for the flavour. Pliny includes indices of authors and texts, mostly lost, which served as sources for each book, and although we cannot pinpoint precisely which textual source Pliny's inclusion of *acutus* in his Book 15 list of generic flavours reflects, the horticultural tradition may have exerted some influence. An example of this tradition is Sabinus Tiro's now lost, first-century bce *Garden Matters* (Κηπουρικά), which Pliny draws upon explicitly for a fact about rue, mint, savory (*cunila*) and basil (19.177). Pliny, however, is not known for cleaving closely to sources he cites that we do know.³⁹ Consequently, the presence of *acutus* in Pliny's list could have been drawn from multiple corners of the library where botanical topics are treated.

Pliny is not satisfied with a bare-bones list of traditional and unremarkable flavours, and his penchant for surprising and enchanting readers with the wonders of nature (*mirabilia*) comes through. To the simple ten-flavour list in which *acutus* occurs, Pliny adds descriptions of three flavours "of a really amazing nature" (*mirabili maxime natura*): (1) one in which many flavours are tasted at once ... all of which are foreign (*alienus*) to the substance, such as the tannic, sweet, fresh and mild flavours in wine (a flavour Pliny later calls *vinosus*); (2) the characteristic "blandness" (*lenitas*) of milk that is neither oily (*pinguis*) nor sweet (*dulcis*), but something both foreign (*alienus*) to all other flavours and completely its own; and (3) no flavour at all (*nullus ... sucus*), typical of water (later in the text also less imaginatively called *aquatilis* (Greek *hudatōdēs*, 19.186)).

In setting apart wine-flavour, blandness (*lenitas*) and no flavour (*nullus ... sucus*), Pliny is partaking of a favourite textual, intellectual and rhetorical exercise of his time and later: the charting of wonders (*mirabilia*) and writing about the paradoxical (Greek *paradoxon*). These observations are paradoxes in the sense that they are surprising and contrary to expectation both in their expression and in relationship to traditional textual traditions.⁴⁰ In his wine-flavour, Pliny's paradox is that wine has a single flavour recognizable as wine, but that this flavour does not come from a wine-flavouring element (*sucus*). Rather the flavour of wine is generated by the presence of four (*austerus*, *acutus*, *dulcis* and *suaui*s) equally perceived flavouring

elements that have nothing to do with wine *per se*.⁴¹ Furthermore, that this perceived single flavour is, in fact, multiple equally occurring flavours is itself unexpected.

Building on the paradoxes of wine-flavour, Pliny moves to *lenitas*, a blandness that milk exhibits, not properly milk-flavour, but a unique flavour all its own.⁴² Pliny's paradoxical flavour description is heightened in the case of blandness. Unlike the composite flavour of wine, blandness is something *like* sweet, oily and mild flavours without being one of or a combination of them. Milk's blandness even provides a further paradox: it is a non-flavour that "takes the place of a flavour", both a flavour and not quite a flavour.

Pliny's rhetoric truly reaches a climax in his last flavour of miraculous nature: no flavour. It is the ultimate paradox that the presence of no flavour element (*nullus ... sucus*) constitutes a flavour. Properly, it should constitute nothing in the way of flavour. But Pliny drops his audience into an abyss for the sake of sheer wonder about flavour in nature. Fittingly, Pliny's work immediately proceeds to develop this wonderment about the very building blocks of nature. Pliny registers flavourlessness, the property of the basic elements of air, fire, and water as *mirum*, something remarkable (15.108), rendering flavourlessness not only surprising for its positive existence in the form of a flavouring element, but as the very flavour property of three of the four building blocks of nature.

In his discussion of flavours, Pliny draws the reader into a state of enlightened wonderment about the natural world as he catalogues its intricacies. Pliny begins with a simple observation about thirteen generic flavours of flavouring elements and, then, catalogues ten uncontroversial, traditional flavours. After this list, however, we are quickly plunged into paradoxography that describes increasingly surprising flavours that show nature to be more and more astonishing. Such paradoxography is part of Pliny's thematic framework in his multi-book *Natural History*. When Pliny returns to the already marked winey flavour (*vinosus*) a few books later, he draws attention to another remarkable fact (*quod miremur*): that grapes are not *vinosus* (15.109), but wild pears, mulberries and myrtle berries are.⁴³ For Pliny, the catalogue of thirteen generic flavours is merely one stop in his narrative tour of nature-generated marvels.

The talking and tasting tongue: Julius Pollux

Second Sophistic author Julius Pollux generates wonder about flavour differently from Pliny. As we saw with Galen's linguistic investigations, the great interest of the Second Sophistic in understanding Greek texts – ancient even then – applies to its treatments of flavour. This obsession is especially evident in the period's attempts at reconstructing from these texts an "Attic" dialect for speaking and writing that was simultaneously advantageous for elite speakers to know and frequently parodied for its puzzling archaisms and stilted phrases.⁴⁴ Julius Pollux's second-century ce *Onomastikon*, an artfully executed Greek vocabulary book addressed to Commodus, shows flavour reproduced as a study and artistic presentation of this archaizing language.

There is the tongue as well, the most beautiful of the parts in the face, seated behind the "fence" and "forward fortification" of the teeth. It is the fount and chorus leader of speech and indicator of flavour, distinguishing each of the tastes; with the fluidity of its moving around inside the mouth, it beats out the sounds of the voice; with upwards motion, it sends food along its way. It is called by some the "taste" (*geusis*) and "guitar pick" (*plēktron*), the former from its function, the latter from the fact that it fashions words by striking the air. It is a fleshy complex formed from membrane and veins, uncompact in texture and rolling around easily. Underneath it is smooth, opposite the bottom of the mouth; on top it is rough over the part against the palate; and it is sharp (*oxus*) insofar as it engages with the air.⁴⁵

The section above on the tongue shows the remarkable lengths to which a writer or speaker could go in the Second Sophistic to reproduce archaic language. Pollux draws from epic formulae and technical military language to describe the tongue's position behind the Homeric "barrier of the teeth" (*odontōn herkos*)⁴⁶ and the martial "forward fortification" (*proteichisma*).⁴⁷ He then continues to weave together the vocabulary of the tongue's two functions of tasting and speaking (2.104–11). The tongue appears as an Athenian theatre producer (chorus leader, *chorēgos*), and, in a further Atticizing moment, Pollux calls the tongue the "discerner" of flavour (*geuseōs gnōmōn*, 2.104), an echo of the fourth-century bce *Memorabilia* by Athenian soldier of fortune, historian and philosopher Xenophon, in which Socrates describes the tongue as the *gnōmōn* (indicator) in the perception (*aesthesis*) of sweet (*glukus*) and bitter (*drimus*), and all

other pleasant (*hēdus*) things (1.4.5). With his speech Pollux is aiming to achieve what Greeks called *kainā*, novel things to say derived from ancient textual sources.⁴⁸ Turns of phrase such as “indicator of flavour” (*geuseōs gnōmōn*) reveal the impulse to redeploy ancient phrases in new contexts for impressive oratorical or literary display. Pollux’s virtuoso display of language here achieves an effect similar to Pliny’s string of paradoxes, inspiring wonder in his audience.

In Pollux’s physical description of the tongue, its qualities apply neatly to both speech and taste. The tongue’s moistness (*hugrotēs*), recalling the unique Platonic marker of sweetness (it naturally spreads moisture, as discussed above), is converted in Pollux’s text to fluidity, in the sense of articulate of speech. The tongue’s physiology in speaking is described as a “sharp blade” (*oxeia*, 2.105) in relation to the air, a turn of phrase that deftly returns to the militaristic epic and technical language of the beginning of the passage. Pollux’s mention of the tongue’s sharpness both describes the physical point required for the tongue’s engagement with the air in speech and, remarkably, puns on a flavour descriptor, sour (*oxus*), an oblique reference to the connection between tongue as indicator of flavour and producer of words.

Later, Pollux catalogues different flavour elements in a process he describes as “distinguishing” (*krinein*, 2.110), again reproducing textually the tongue’s function as distinguisher of flavours (*diakrinousa tōn chumōn hekaston*, 2.104) and its function as producer of words:

It is possible to distinguish flavours as sour (*oxus*), pungent (*drimus*), biting (*odaxētikous*), bitter (*pikros*), salty (*halmuros*), “saltie” (*halukos*) – Plato makes use of the word “saltie” in *Timaeus* [65d] – disagreeable (*dusphereis*), unpleasant (*aēdēs*), sweet (*glukus*), pleasant (*hēdus*), mild (*eumenēs*) and maddening (*eklussōn*).⁴⁹

Pollux follows this with a second series of words derived from “voice” (*phōnē*, 2.111), bringing into full relief the dual functions of the tongue he describes through lists of Greek vocabulary. Distinguishing among flavours is marked out as the work of both the tongue and the words it produces in reading aloud Pollux’s text.

Pollux’s idiosyncratic list of twelve flavours has a few peculiar characteristics. Of the seven or eight most commonly identified flavour elements, he includes sour, pungent, bitter, salty and sweet,

excluding the family of drying, tannic and unripe flavours as well as oily (*liparos*). By contrast, he includes several additional terms, some unique, such as biting (*odaxētikous*) and “maddening” (*eklussōn*), as well as others for pleasantness, mildness, disagreeableness and unpleasantness. Since the antonymous terms for pleasant and unpleasant flavours constellate around sweet (*glukus*), perhaps we are to read them as related to its pleasantness. The absence of oily (*liparos*) makes the list read as Platonic in origin. Indeed, Plato appears in the form of a citation about the term *halukos* in the middle of Pollux’s list, which serves to set apart sweetness (and its synonyms and antonyms) from the rest of the flavours, just as Plato marks this flavour as special in the *Timaeus*, the very text cited here by Pollux.

With his interest in Plato’s use of the word *halukos* in the *Timaeus*, Pollux also brings into the world of flavour the Atticizing, archaizing obsession that motivates his text. Pollux offers Plato’s testimony (*Timaeus* 65d) as evidence for *halukos* (“saltie”) as the Platonic – read Atticizing Greek – version of salty. Not only does this set Pollux’s work apart from that of his contemporaries Alcinous and Alexander of Aphrodisias (who use *halmuros* instead), it also adds an air of linguistic authority and authenticity to his work. Pollux describes the usage of the Greek language of the ancient past and revels in its knowledge, just as Galen did in his discussion of the difference between the usage of *chumos* and *chulos*.

Two taste words, however, stand out in Pollux’s catalogue and add to the novelty of his work: *odaxētikos* and *eklussōn*. *odaxētikos* is a *hapax legomenon*, which means that it appears only here in the history of the Greek language. The term is derived from the verb meaning “to feel irritation” (*odaxein*). Its position between pungent (*drimus*) and bitter (*pikros*) in the list suggests it might mean “irritating” or “biting”.⁵⁰ The term *eklussōn*, if it is in fact from a compound of the verb “to rage, to drive insane” (*lussan*), is a greater puzzle. One can only imagine what a “raging”, “insane” or “rabid” flavour might be. The flavour could reflect any number of extremes related to madness: wildly bad, frothy, ecstatically desirable, but it is the ecstasy in the last possibility that may hold the key to understanding what Pollux means.

The term *eklussōn* may refer to a wine flavour. We are missing tannic and drying terms (such as *struphnos* and *austēros*) in Pollux’s list, terms strongly associated in Greek and Roman antiquity, as they are today, with wine.⁵¹ The location of *eklussōn* at the end of Pollux’s list with sweet *glukus* (along with pleasant and its antonyms) may help

this understanding along. Theophrastus considers winey (*oinōdēs*) a type of flavour derived from sweet (*glukus*).⁵² Furthermore, as above, we may consider Pollux’s reference to Plato’s “saltie” (*halukos*) in the *Timaeus* as positioned to divide the list evenly into six terms on either side of it (see Table 12.5).

Table 12.5Pollux’s twelve flavours (*chumoi*), *Onomasticon* 2.110–11, second century CE

Order	Greek flavours	English
1	ὄξεις (<i>oxeis</i>)	sour flavours
2	δριμεῖς (<i>drimeis</i>)	hot, pungent flavours
3	ὀδαξητικούς (<i>odaxētikous</i>)	biting flavours
4	πικρούς (<i>pikrous</i>)	bitter flavours
5	ἄλμυρούς (<i>halmurous</i>)	salty flavours
6	ἄλυκούς (<i>halukous</i>) (Citation confirming ancient use of <i>halukos</i> in Plato, <i>Timaeus</i>)	“saltie” flavours
7	δυσχερεῖς (<i>duscheréis</i>)	disagreeable flavours
8	ἀηδεῖς (<i>aēdeis</i>)	unpleasant flavours
9	γλυκεῖς (<i>glukeis</i>)	sweet flavours
10	ἡδεῖς (<i>hēdeis</i>)	pleasant flavours
11	εὐμενεῖς (<i>eumeneis</i>)	mild flavours
12	ἐκλυσσώντας (<i>eklussōntas</i>)	maddening flavours

If we take the Platonic quotation as the centre and pair terms in the same position on either side of the *Timaeus* reference, there is a startling symmetry that emerges. Two flavours, disagreeable (*duscherēs*) and unpleasant (*aēdēs*), would be opposed to the two salt flavours (*halukos* and *halmuros*). Sweet (*glukus*) would be opposed to bitter (*pikros*), a common opposition we have seen in the Aristotelian Alexander of Aphrodisias. Mild (*eumenēs*) and hot, pungent (*drimus*) would be opposed to each other, a pair easily viewed as opposites. If these correspondences and oppositions are continued, then the first term sour (*oxus*) could have some relationship to the final term *eklussōn* (maddening, madness-inducing). As *oxus* (Latin *acidus*) can describe the flavour of sour wine or vinegar (Greek *oxos*, Latin *acetus*), the final term, *eklussōn* (maddening, madness-inducing), then, could represent the flavour of a kind of opposite of sour wine, that is, simply

a flavour of wine, the ecstatic and madness-inducing (*eklussōn*) element of Dionysus' drink that we know today is caused by its alcohol content.⁵³

Pollux's discussion of the tongue and flavours partakes of all the themes under discussion. Pollux's work uniquely engages with ancient textual tradition to produce a novel and surprising rendering of flavour. Pollux's catalogue of flavour elements works within a tradition, for example with his references to Plato and inclusion of basic flavour vocabulary, while it also achieves a particular height of novelty by listing terms so rare that we have no other source for them. In his discussion of the tongue and flavour, Pollux overwhelms the reader with one product of the tongue, language, in order to render the matter of taste sensation a dizzying experience of words.

Conclusion

Roman technical flavour lists of the first two centuries CE are highly indebted to an array of textual and intellectual traditions. Beyond this force of tradition in shaping these authors' writing on flavour is an impulse, a push against the inertia of these very same traditions, to write through paradox: cataloguing the marvellous, the novel, the surprising and the unexpected. A modern audience may be startled by the striking commonality between authors as seemingly different as Galen, the doctor, Pliny, the natural historian, and Pollux, the lexicographer. Often interested in cataloguing and establishing the terms of flavour discourse rather than in investigating the finer distinctions in sensation, these authors aim to win over their audiences through their understanding of and creative engagement with textual traditions on flavour. Through their words, they provide readers a taste of the extraordinary.

¹As is the case with this period's treatment of almost all other topics, scholars too often impute a lack of originality to the work of authors in the area of taste and flavour. For example, for a mention of the second-century CE Platonist Alcinous' lack of originality in matters of flavour, see Dillon (1993: 144). For corrections to such views, see König's (2009) overview of the literary and intellectual tendencies of the period in Greek authors.

²Anderson (1993) offers a still excellent discussion of this trend in the Second Sophistic, especially the elements of paradox and novelty. For the competitive aspect of performance embedded in the power structures of the period, see Schmitz (1997). Whitmarsh's (2005) handbook is very instructive in general and consolidates scholarly thinking on these matters. See, for example, Whitmarsh (2005: 54–5) on *kainotēs*, novelty that he calls "innovation".

Emphasis on novelty, however, is not unique to the Second Sophistic proper; the first line of the preface of Pliny's *Natural History* (*Naturalis historia*) announces that his work is novel (*novicium ... opus*, 1.1)

- 3For example, Plutarch of Chaeronea (c. 50–120 CE), who is often excluded from the “Second Sophistic”. See Meeusen (2014) in general for an account of the marvellous and strange in Plutarch’s “scientific” observations. See especially Meeusen’s n.26 for basic bibliography on wonder and paradoxography in ancient science and literature. See below for Pliny the Elder and such marvels of nature.
- 4Commodus appointed Pollux to the highest rhetorical post in Athens (Philostratus, *Lives of Sophists* 593 in Wright (1921: 241)). On Pollux, see Matthaïos (2015: 294–6); Mauduit (2013); Bearzot *et al.* (2007). No English-language translation of Pollux’s text is available. For the Greek, the edition used is *Pollucis Onomasticon*, edited by Bethe (1900–31).
- 5In line with the idea that *chumoi/chuloi* are individuated and generic properties perceived within the framework of the perception of flavour (*geusis*), the Greek terms are often discussed alongside properties of other perceptions, such as colours (vision), sounds (hearing), scents (smell). See Aristotle, *On the Soul* (*De anima*) 426a31–b1. Early in the period under discussion, see Philo, *On the Creation of the World* (*De opificio mundi*) 62.9. See [Table 3.1](#) for ancient flavour lists and their ordering.
- 6Modern scientific accounts of taste emphasize chemical detection of various substances in receptors on the tongue, soft palate, and pharynx for *at least* five “tastes”. See Rudolph’s discussion in the introduction to this volume and Breslin (2013). Cf. Boulay ([Chapter 11](#)).
- 7See Pearson and Sandbach’s Loeb edition (1965: 140) of Plutarch, *Natural Questions* (*Quaestiones naturales*) for a distinction between quality and substance in matters of flavour. Pearson and Sandbach translate *chumoi* “flavourings” (qualities) rather than “flavours” (substances).
- 8The best example of this tendency can be found in Pliny’s rant against gourmandising. He declares that the pig uniquely has fifty flavours (*sapores*) corresponding to each different part, such as the cheek or uterus; he uses *sapor* to refer to the experience of tasting specific pig parts (*Natural History* 8.209.5–11). Similarly, when he claims that *suci* (juices/flavours) have thirteen *communia genera saporum* (common types of flavours), meaning salty, sweet, bitter and other types (15.106.1–2), he uses the same term (*sapor*), simply replacing the pig parts with individuated generic flavouring elements, e.g. the flavour (*sapor*) of the generic salt flavour (*sucus*) rather than the flavour (*sapor*) of pig’s cheek.
- 9See [Table 3.1](#) for ancient flavour lists and their ordering. Caution, however, is due in allowing for complete equivalence between Greek and Latin terms. For example, Pliny’s *acer* (piquant) is sometimes equivalent to Galen’s *drimus* (peppery, piquant) (e.g., in the case of oregano, Pliny, *Natural History* 19.186.3; Galen, *On the Mixing and Powers of Simple Remedies* (*De simplicium medicamentorum temperamentis ac facultatibus*) 12.161.1 Kühn), but not in the most obvious case: black pepper from India, whose distinguishing quality for Pliny is not its hot, piquant (*acer*) taste as in Galen (*drimus*), but its bitterness (*amaritudo*, Pliny, *Natural History* 12.29).
- 10On the latter see Rudolph (introduction to this volume and [Chapter 2](#)) and Totelin ([Chapter 3](#)).
- 11Enumeration in the form of a simple list appears to have begun with the Peripatetic Theophrastus. See below.
- 12Dillon’s (1993) translation makes this text accessible in English. Summerell &

Zimmer (2007) provides the most recent edition of the Greek text, accompanied by German translation.

- 13For this account of flavour in Plato's *Timaeus* see O'Brien (1984).
- 14Dillon (1993: 144). On Theophrastus and the role of sweetness and honey see Totelin (Chapter 3).
- 15As Rudolph (Chapter 2) shows, the unique position of sweetness in Plato's discussion in the *Timaeus* can be related to Plato's focus on ethics (esp. pain vs. pleasure) and the passivity of lower-order, non-knowledge-producing senses.
- 16See Caston (2012) for an introduction to the text and English translation with illuminating notes. The Greek edition is that of Bruns (1887).
- 17For these eight flavour terms see Aristotle, *On the Senses* (*De sensu et sensibilibus*) 442a17–19 and Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* (*De causis plantarum*) 6.1.2.2. Theophrastus provides a simple list of eight; Aristotle explains the relationship among the flavours.
- 18For seven flavours and colours, see Aristotle, *On the Senses* 442a20–1.
- 19For Alexander's collapsing of terminology following Aristotle, see Alexander of Aphrodisias, *Commentary on Aristotle's "On the Senses"* (*In librum de sensu commentarium*) 81. See Towey (2000) with notes on this passage.
- 20See Klotz & Oikonomopoulou (2011) for excellent discussions and bibliography on Plutarch's use of this genre, especially his eclecticism in drawing together Aristotelian and Platonic traditions.
- 21Plutarch, *Natural Questions* (*Quaestiones naturales*) 913a–b. Plutarch's answers to this Aristotelian question include quotations of Plato's *Timaeus*, an example of his blending of philosophical traditions. Pliny (*Natural History* 19.186) discusses briefly the lack of saltiness in fruit, paradoxically claiming that even though no plant has an inborn salty flavour, the *cicerula* (perhaps the grass pea, Dalby 2003, s.v. grass pea) does have salt that forms on its outside like dust.
- 22Suda, s.v. *phaion* ("grey") (*phi*, 179). For Greek text accompanied by English translation, see "Phaion", in Suda On Line, trans. Antonella Ippolito (8 September 2005). www.stoa.org/sol-entries/phi/179; accessed 3 November 2015.
- 23Another version of these groups of flavours is attributed to an Apollonius (if Apollonius of Tyana (c. 40–c. 100 CE), then the list is Neo-Pythagorean) by John Lydus in his sixth-century CE calendrical work *On the Months* (*De mensibus*) 4.125 Wünsch (1898). Inserted in a list resembling the Platonic seven are two novel terms: *brinchos* (located between pungent and unripe/astringent but of no obvious meaning) and *blennōdēs* (slimy).
- 24In general see Gill *et al.* (2009) for Galen's position in the intellectual culture of the time. See von Staden (1997) first for this Second Sophistic Galen, and see below for the period's obsession with archaizing speech.
- 25Galen, *On the Mixing and Powers of Simple Remedies* 11.450 Kühn.
- 26Dillon (1993) places Alcinous slightly before Galen.
- 27The mid-twentieth-century editor of Alcinous' text, Louis (1945: 103), perhaps influenced by Galenic thinking on language, prefers a variant reading *chumos*, but subsequent editions, Whittaker's Budé (1990) and Summerell & Zimmer (2007), have correctly preferred the reading in the manuscripts, *chulos*.
- 28Against *Lycus* (*Adversus Lycum*) 18a.196–245 Kühn. See Mattern (2008) for this agonistic Galen. See Boulay's discussion (Chapter 11) of Galenic wine analysis for similar distinctions in relation to particular foodstuffs.
- 29Galen elsewhere has in mind the work of Aristotle and Theophrastus on inquiries about nature (*phusika zētēmata*). See *On the Mixing and Powers of Simple Remedies* 11.474 Kühn. See van der Eijk (2009: 262) for a summary of scholarship on Aristotelian elements in Galen.

- 30Galen, *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* (*De alimentorum facultatibus*) 6.475 Kühn. Cf. Galen, *On the Mixing and Powers of Simple Remedies* 11.453 Kühn, where Galen uses *struphnos*, to mean flavours like that of unripe wild pears; the flavour *austēros* (Latin *austerus*) is most often connected to wine and probably refers to the tannic “drying” of the roof of the mouth produced by red wines.
- 31All translations are my own. *On the Properties of Foodstuffs* 6.475 Kühn: τὸ δ’ ἄλυσκὸν οὐκ ἄλλο τι σημαίνει παρὰ τὸ ἄλμυρόν, ἀλλ’ ὑπ’ ἀμφοῖν ἔν τι δηλοῦται, στρυφνοῦ δὲ καὶ αὐστηροῦ τὸ κοινὸν γένος ὀνομάζεται στύφον.
- 32On the critical importance of such wonders (*mirabilia*) in Pliny see Beagon (1992), Healy (1999) and Naas (2011). For an excellent sustained reading of Pliny’s work in a Roman imperial context see Murphy (2004).
- 33See Totelin (Chapter 3) for the botanical and pharmacological importance of this form of flavour description.
- 34Pliny misses an eleventh generic flavour term that he himself uses elsewhere: *asper* (harsh), used to describe seawater (*Natural History* 2.222.9) and the citron (15.110.6), a fruit that is not to Pliny *acidus* (sour) as we might incorrectly assume.
- 35Pliny, *Natural History* 15.106–8 Mayhoff (1892–1909): “Interim quae sunt communia et pomis omnibusque sucis saporum genera XIII reperiuntur: dulcis, suavis, pinguis, amarus, austerus, acer, acutus, acerbus, acidus, salsus. praeter haec tria sunt genera mirabili maxime natura: unum in quo plures pariter sentiuntur sapor, ut vinis; namque in <i>is et austerus et acutus et dulcis et suavis, omnes alieni. alterum est genus in quo sit et alienus quidem, sed et suus quidam ac peculiaris, ut in lacte; si quidem inest ei quod tamen iure dici dulce et pingue et suave non possit, optinente lenitate, quae ipsa succedit in saporis vicem. nullus hic aquis ne <c> suscus, ut tamen eo ipso fiat aliquis ac suum genus faciat.... mirum tria naturae praecipua elementa sine sapore esse, sine odore, sine suco: aquas, aëra, ignes.”
- 36Latin *suavis*, “mild”, “pleasant” or “on the sweet side”, has a Greek equivalent (both etymologically from the same proto-Indo-European root as Eng. *sweet*) in the term *hēdus*, which we will see in Julius Pollux’s list below.
- 37Pliny’s three paradoxical flavours could be considered complex and creative variations on the Greek flavours *oinōdēs* (winey), *galaktōdēs* (milky) and *hudatōdēs* (watery). Contrast a comparatively tame Greek treatment of these flavours: Theophrastus (*On the Causes of Plants* 6.9.2) considers winey (*oinōdēs*), honey-flavoured (*melitōdēs*), milky (*galaktōdēs*) and watery (*hudatōdēs*) to be mere subspecies of the sweet flavour (*glukus*).
- 38See Dalby (2003), s.v. *savory*.
- 39See Henderson (2004: 25, 67–102) on Pliny’s Roman horticultural proclivities, his love of beguiling his audience with the weird and miraculous, and his slapdash use of his horticultural source material.
- 40These are not (necessarily) logical paradoxes. See Naas (2011: 66–7) for the rise of paradox in Pliny’s work as a “different kind of knowledge” rather than an abasement of knowledge.
- 41See Boulay (Chapter 11) on the various tasting characteristics of wine.
- 42Beets partake of this same “blandness” (*lenitas*), which, Pliny observes, is enlivened by the pungency (*acrimonia* from *acer*, one of the generic flavour types Pliny mentions) of mustard (*Natural History* 19.133).
- 43Grapes for Pliny are simply sweet (15.109). The understanding of myrtle berries as winey (*oinōdēs*) can also be found in Theophrastus *On the Causes of Plants* 6.7.4.
- 44For an outstanding treatment of this period’s archaism in language and thought in general, see Kim (2010). For Pollux as a “moderate Atticist” see Zecchini

(2007). For further analysis of Pollux's outlook on language see Matthaïos (2013). Lucian (c. 125–post 180 CE), the satirist of the period, famously explores in his *Lexiphanes* the vast comic possibilities of the misunderstandings arising from the archaic language of Atticists like Julius Pollux.

45Pollux, *Onomasticon* 2.104–5.5 Bethe.

46See Homer, *Iliad* 4.350.

47First used in the Athenian historian Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* 4.90 and then frequently in technical military treatises as well as the Septuagint, in Song of Songs 2:14, where it describes a rock outcropping. See Telò (Chapter 4) for Matro's Hellenistic transposition of Homeric tropes and characters into a sensory context. For the functions of the mouth, see Rudolph (Introduction); for the relation between taste and judgement see Rudolph (Chapter 2).

48See above for this emphasis on novelty, Greek *kainotēs*, Latin *novicius* (novel).

49κρίνειν χυμούς ὀξεῖς, δριμεῖς, ὀδαξητικούς, πικρούς, ἀλμυρούς, ἀλυκοὺς – Πλάτων γὰρ καὶ τῷ ἀλυκῷ ὀνόματι ἐν Τιμαίῳ κέχρηται – δυσχερεῖς, ἀηδεῖς, γλυκεῖς, ἡδεῖς, εὐμενεῖς, ἐκλυσσῶντας. Pollux, *Onomasticon* 2.110–11.

50The overly specific definition of *LSJ*, s.v. ὀδαξητικός, “causing to itch”, has no substantial support in the text.

51See Boulay (Chapter 11).

52Theophrastus, *On the Causes of Plants* 6.9.2.

53For Greek flavour terms and alcohol content see Boulay (Chapter 11).

Tastes of danger and pleasure in early and late antique Christianity

Béatrice Caseau

As Rachel Fulton noted: “while we can see (and hear) objects other than ourselves without touching them, we cannot taste without taking something of their substance into our mouth and absorbing it through the membranes of the epithelial cells in our tongues”.¹ As has become clear in the preceding chapters, taste is an intimate experience, close to touch, which combines physiological and cultural elements. The sense of taste, however, is not entirely physiological; it is educated by the transmission of inherited tastes from one generation to the next. As Banducci, Baker, Livarda and MacKinnon have discussed, taste is linked to food habits and diet, which can be culturally, medically and environmentally determined. However, the education of taste-buds starts early in life and is strongly connected to cultural and family habits. While very young children tend to taste everything, they are also told what not to put in their mouth. Learning what not to taste – what to leave aside with disgust – is as important as learning to enjoy tasteful foods. Dietary habits or prescriptions are, therefore, key elements in determining the tastes that people enjoy. As Hitch, Gowers and Paulas have shown, social and cultural considerations are central to the development of a discourse of taste, and religious groups are a key player in the transmission of rules concerning the regulation of food intake, what tastes good and what forbidden foods should be treated with disgust.

This chapter is devoted to the dietary teachings of Christian authors from the first century AD until the end of late antiquity. During that period, Christians had to decide how to incorporate, reject and transform Jewish dietary preferences and food taboos in a multicultural context, which included Graeco-Roman pagan converts. In Judaism, the proof of one’s obedience to God is evident in one’s adherence to Moses’ dietary prescriptions. Early Christians coming

from a Jewish background could follow these food-related rules, yet they were not imposed on Christians from a pagan background. Central to much of the early Christian literature on food and taste is the notion of disgust. In the first section of this chapter I will explore how the first generation of Jewish Christians had to overcome their disgust, both at seeing people eat forbidden food and at being invited to share the same table. By contrast, traditional cults of the Roman Empire rarely imposed food restrictions on their devotees, so as communities of Christians grew and diversified with converts from these cults, a profound cultural change in taste preferences and eating habits took shape. Driven by the community's need to eat together, dietary restrictions were relaxed and only the rejection of the taste of blood and food offered to idols remained.

Religious and cultural education plays a profound role in shaping taste,² and in turn, what one refuses to taste becomes a defining element in identifying oneself as obedient to God. Obedience takes different forms in Judaism and in Christianity, but the principle is the same. In both religions, some foods were forbidden not because they tasted bad or posed a threat to health, but because they tasted good. Control over the enjoyment of tasting was of the highest importance, lest moral barriers fall. The second section of this chapter, devoted to moral discourses, pinpoints the danger involved in indulging the sense of taste, which includes the pleasure of eating and a preference for certain foods. While Judaism sought to control the types and preparation of food consumed, Christianity, as we will see, developed an ascetic attitude towards alimentary enjoyment in general.

Finally, we will turn to taste as a spiritual experience. The Jewish psalmist (Psalm 34[33]:9) exhorts his listeners to “taste and see that the Lord is good”. Such a notion is also used in Christian settings. In the First Letter of Peter, the author entreates his reader to “get rid of all ill will and all deceit, pretence, envy, and slander. Instead, like a newborn baby, desire the pure milk of the word. Nourished by it, you will grow into salvation, since you have tasted that the Lord is good.”³ Such metaphorical and analogical depictions of taste are not connected to the taste-buds, but to experiencing the divine in an intimate manner similar to tasting and savouring food. Warren's discussion of the literary metaphor of tasting the divine in [Chapter 6](#) explores just one aspect of this. The metaphorical references to taste in patristic literature devoted to explaining the spiritual senses, discussed in this chapter, reveal another.⁴ Yet, for early Christians of the late Roman or early Byzantine empires, tasting the sweetness of

God also alludes to the Eucharist, where bread and wine, transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, open the doors of Paradise. Thus we will see that although taste is not the most valued among the sensory hierarchy,⁵ it has a specific place in Christian religion.⁶ Despite its ability to tempt believers into sensual enjoyment, nevertheless, it is cherished because it allows the faithful to touch the body of Christ and to unite with God in a mystical and practical manner.

Taste, disgust, and the multicultural community

Early Christians defined themselves as followers of Jesus. Yet, after his death, the first generations of Christians had to take steps to hold together communities composed of converts from various religious and cultural backgrounds, which had different dietary habits and taste education. Some came from Jewish families, with their own complex relation to the Jewish Law, while others turned away from traditional polytheist cults to join the recently formed Christian communities. While Jesus' teachings on food and purity, later gathered in the New Testament, challenged Jewish understandings of the relation between food and holiness, the stance of Christian communities in the Graeco-Roman world reveals a hybrid of cultural and religious teaching.

The teachings of Jesus that come down to us in the New Testament reject the principle behind the dietary prescriptions of the Mosaic Law, that holiness can be achieved through diet. This is a very radical challenge to an important aspect of Jewish life, since the book of Leviticus specifically binds sanctity to respect for food requirements. Jews defined themselves as a God-chosen people who follow the Law of Moses, which forbade them to eat food prepared by non-Jews and also to receive at their table people who had eaten impure food.⁷ The Synoptic Gospels, by contrast, convey a revolutionary message from Jesus on Jewish dietary practices. He rejects the idea that ritual purity and its counterpart, ritual impurity, can be created by eating food. He teaches that defilement comes from the heart or from thoughts, and cannot be caused by food entering the mouth, since it passes through the body, having no effect on the soul or the heart of the human being. Intent can create impurity, but not food. Moreover, Jesus seems to reject food taboos. For example, in the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus declares that all food is pure.⁸ He moves the debate away from

the external and material aspects of purity in order to emphasize the moral and spiritual level. Jesus demands of his followers, initially all Jews, a distancing from their dietary habits based on Mosaic prescriptions. He asks that they perform a mental revolution leading ultimately to a change in their daily habits and a revision of their conception of holiness.

The mental and cultural transformation such teaching requires was a step too far for many of Jesus' followers. In Jewish communities, taste education taught children and adults how to recognize forbidden food, deemed disgusting. Educated to consider certain foods as unclean, Jews developed a reflex of disgust in relation to them, as we can see when Peter visits the centurion Cornelius, a very devout God-fearing man, but not a Jew. Peter has a vision asking him to eat food considered impure and he is appalled:

The next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the housetop about the sixth hour to pray. And he became hungry and wanted something to eat, but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance and saw the heavens opened and something like a great sheet descending, being let down by its four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common (*koinon*) or unclean (*akatharton*)." And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has made clean, do not call common (ἃ ὁ θεὸς ἑκάθάρισεν σὺ μὴ κοίνου)." This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.⁹

Peter agrees to enter the house of Cornelius and eat with him, realizing that by joining Cornelius he transgresses one of the laws that forbids Jews to eat with Gentiles, in part because they eat impure food. He nevertheless follows God's orders because God has shown him not to call any person unclean.¹⁰ When back in Jerusalem, he is forced to justify his actions when members of the community rebuke him for eating with a Gentile. This episode illustrates the difficulties that even Jesus' closest disciples had in following his teaching on the absence of forbidden food. Their early cultural and religious education meant they felt disgust at the idea of tasting unclean meat, and special effort was needed to remove the inherent repulsion it stirred in them.

In a community growing with the conversion of Gentiles, the

solution adopted after Jesus' death, at a meeting in Jerusalem, was to let Christians converted from Judaism follow their own dietary practices. However, in order for the whole community to be able to share a common table without discomfort, limited food restrictions were imposed on Christians from a pagan background. Only two dietary restrictions that mattered the most to Jewish Christians were imposed: no one should eat animal blood, meaning that meat had to be bled before it was consumed, and no one should taste food offered to idols.¹¹

Two considerations may have led to the imposition of these particular rules. First, in the eyes of Jewish Christians, eating blood and sacrificial meat were too repulsive, rendering individuals impure. Second, God had forbidden these two particular acts of consumption long before Moses' law. The disgust engendered by the taste of blood and juicy meat clearly outweighs the principle that all food is clean, but as Michael MacKinnon has shown in his chapter on the taste of meat in this volume, salting meat was a common practice in antiquity. Thus, the prohibition against eating bloody meat may not have been as difficult to follow as one might think. By contrast, the rejection of food offered in sacrifice to idols, which the author of Acts labels the "filth of idolatry",¹² was more difficult for some converts than others.

Gentile members of the Christian community scandalized their Jewish brethren by ignoring the prohibition against eating food offered to idols while attending the great banquets following public sacrifices. In the Roman world, civic cult festivals provided an opportunity for all citizens to enjoy festive banquets in which participants were invited to taste the meat offered to the gods; not attending was a difficult renunciation for some of the converts. The Christian community in Corinth included Christians from the synagogue and converts from paganism, and in his first letter to the church Paul addresses just such concerns.¹³ Similarly, in the Letter to the Romans, it is clear that heated debates arose among the early Christian community in the capital around food practices.¹⁴ Although the author of the letter supports those who refuse to condemn food as ritually impure, equally he does not want to judge those who continue to abide by Mosaic Law, admitting that they follow their conscience and act according to religious scruples. Nonetheless, taking up the teaching of Jesus on the purity of all foods, the author moderates its implementation on the ground of charity.

One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person

eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgement on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. ... Therefore let us not pass judgement on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.¹⁵

One cannot help but note the diversity of attitudes towards tasting forbidden food in this Graeco-Roman Christian community. Although the author makes clear his own view on the subject, he guides his readers towards open-mindedness, both for the one who would hinder another from eating something unclean and for the one who would offend another by his chosen meal. It is notable in this passage that some Christian converts advocated a preference for vegetarianism as a way to avoid eating the forbidden meat, because much of the butcher's meat might come from offerings to the temples and therefore from sacrifices.¹⁶ Paul himself says he would rather do without meat altogether than scandalize newly converted Christians.¹⁷ In this rejection of meat in favour of a vegetarian diet, one can also perhaps see a forerunner of asceticism, anticipating what will be practiced in monastic circles, three centuries later.¹⁸

What becomes clear from examining these early epistles is that there is no single common rule or guideline for dietary compliance in early Christianity because the religious, and therefore cultural, origins of the converts played a role in their attitude to food and taste. Moreover, the guidance that did govern Christian dietary precepts was not simple. Paul, in 1 Corinthians, says one can eat anything that is sold in the market without making any inquiry,¹⁹ that is to say without finding out if the meat comes from an animal sacrificed to the pagan deities. However, if one knows that the animal was indeed sacrificed, then one should not taste the meat. The same rule prevails when one is invited to dinner.

If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice", then do not eat it, for the sake

of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience – I do not mean your conscience, but his.²⁰

Clearly, Gentile converts to Christianity enjoyed tasting and eating meat as they used to when they followed the traditional cults of their cities. Yet, in these Christian communities, others educated to feel disgust at meat prepared in a non-Jewish manner balked at the idea of eating just any meat without asking questions. Thus we see that deeply ingrained cultural tastes, with their attendant reactions of disgust and appreciation, led to an openness in early Christian doctrine that makes purity and impurity a matter of conscious intention, and reflect the multiculturalism of its followers.

Gluttony and the sinful pleasures of taste

From the second century CE onwards, most Christian converts were from a pagan rather than a Jewish background. Christianity had not turned away from the Old Testament, and a challenging exercise had begun concerning how to engage with the interpretation of the broader dietary requirements in the Torah. The discourse around food, therefore, shifted towards explaining why God, in the Scriptures, had forbidden man from tasting the flesh of certain animals. One explanation was to point out that Moses' Law was imposed on disobedient Jews as a punishment, which no longer applied to Christians saved and freed by Christ. Yet, for those who believed that the Old Testament had significance beyond the historical narration, it was a difficult but necessary exercise to offer a spiritual or moral interpretation of the dietary restrictions.

Philo, the first-century CE Jewish philosopher from Alexandria, tried to apply himself to the task of moral biblical interpretation in his text *The Special Laws*. For Philo, dietary restrictions were created to make humans aware of the necessity to control one's appetites and fight against passions, since for him, the primary concern is the pleasure of taste. God banned animals whose flesh is "fat and succulent, and, thus, tickles and teases with pleasure".²¹ Taste, on Philo's interpretation, is at the core of Old Testament dietary restrictions. He goes on to explain that God forbade both the eating of pork, because pigs are the more palatable of terrestrial animals, and the consumption of fish without scales, because they taste the best of all marine animals.

Philo also provides an interpretation that is reminiscent of the

adage “you are what you eat”. He asserts that dietary prescriptions are also linked to the behaviour of animals. Those whose behaviour is condemned by human morality are reprehensible to eat. For example, it is forbidden to eat the meat of carnivores, because they are ferocious, and there is a risk of becoming like them. By contrast, it is permitted to eat ruminants because they have a soft character. Tasting the flesh of a dangerous animal and enjoying it, brings into one’s body and soul the cruelty and ferocity of the animal. Philo further argues that animals are selected based on their behaviour as a warning to humans against moral defects they face. He suggests that the dietary laws contain an ethical message: by forbidding eating reptiles, animals which crawl on their abdomen, Moses in fact points to “humans devoted to their stomach”. The pleasures of gastronomy are unethical for Philo.

Philo’s interpretation had a great influence on later Christian writers, who sought to give a symbolic meaning to the food requirements of the Mosaic Law. For example, the Epistle of Barnabas, a text of the second century CE, was greatly influenced by Philo’s exegesis of forbidden food in the Jewish Law. The author believes that Moses used a spiritual language when he set out the list of forbidden foods, suggesting it has a metaphorical rather than a literal meaning. Food taboos and the zoological classification that accompanies them are actually a way of describing good and bad people or good and bad behaviour. Thus, for the author, the prohibition against eating pork has nothing to do with food *per se*, rather, one must avoid acting like a pig, who guzzles and is indifferent to his master.²² The implication is that those who behave in the same way should be shunned; in other words, do not eat with sinners. For the author of the Epistle, holiness as mentioned in the chapter of Leviticus does not depend on the diet, but stems from behaviour.

Clement of Alexandria (d. c. 215) had read the Epistle of Barnabas, which he cites.²³ In his work, he incorporates similar ideas about the interpretation of dietary restrictions and some of his examples, like the hyena, are taken directly from the Epistle. Clement, too, establishes a form of equivalence between pigs and wicked men:

The wise educator, speaking through the mouth of Moses and wanting to show that the company of the wicked stains like that of pigs, banned the ancient people to consume pork: he advertised that those who invoke God should not mingle with unclean men, who, like pigs, find their joy in pleasures of the senses, in the

Taste is among the senses that give pleasure. Christians authors insist on the importance of controlling such a pleasure, lest one behave like pigs. This depiction differs markedly from the images portrayed in the *locus classicus* for a city of pigs, where Socrates uses them as the marker of good honest living, free from the luxuries and delicacies that he suggests plague Athens.²⁵

This trend towards limiting the pleasure of taste, by imposing fasting periods or by changing the relation to food, grew from the fourth century CE until the Reformation. Preachers taught that, in the book of Genesis, Christians could find proof that indulging their sense of taste was dangerous for their salvation: the first sin was one of greed for a tasty fruit, which led to the Fall of the human race. God provided all the sustenance that Adam and Eve needed in the Garden of Eden, but had forbidden eating these specific fruits, a reminder that beautiful appearance and good taste should not be the only guide in food choices. Christians were entreated to remember that biblical food prohibition is not based on health or personal safekeeping, but on a renunciation of what is good, in order to give priority to one's relationship with God. Obedience is real when one refuses to yield to the desire to taste the forbidden fruit, something Eve failed to do. Genesis 3:6 recalls the event:

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.

Sight and taste combine with a desire for wisdom in a formative event that gives the first human beings knowledge of good and evil. Eve and Adam discover themselves and the world through tasting this fruit, but they also lose access to the divine provision of the garden. From an act motivated by pleasurable sensory stimulation of the eyes and mouth, comes the painful experiences of hunger, sickness and death. This episode reveals, that from the very beginning of Judeo-Christian thinking, food is to be understood as more than just calorie intake for the sustaining of life. Food is at the heart of the relationship between man and God.²⁶ As long as humanity remained obedient to God, visual and gustatory pleasures were theirs to enjoy, since God had taken care to create a garden full of all kinds of trees, producing fruits

both delicious to eat and attractive to view.²⁷ Even with the natural abundance represented by the garden, however, this episode makes clear that tasting food is not a neutral gesture, it places one in a position of experiencing either gratitude for the food given by God to sustain and enjoy life, or guilt for disobeying and eating food He forbids. The dangers associated with taste, which Hitch and Gowers have explored in Greek and Roman literary contexts, is also true in biblical literature, since taste leads to temptation. Late antique Christians build upon this link between consumption, enjoyment and the dangers of sin.²⁸

In addition to highlighting the dangerous seduction of taste, the episode of the forbidden fruit, for early Christian authors and artists, also reinforced the way Adam and Eve were shamed by their nakedness, from which emerged a discourse on frugality and control over the senses, especially the sense of taste. Ascetic-minded Christians wished to assert control over their bodies by avoiding good-tasting foods. Such asceticism gained momentum at the end of antiquity, and set out a definition of the proper attitude an ascetic Christian should have towards the pleasure of eating and the refinements of gastronomy. Monks and nuns were told that if they succumbed to the pleasures of taste, they would fall into greater sins. Evagrius Ponticus (d. 399 CE) places *gastrimargia*, gluttony, as the first of eight thoughts troubling the soul, the second being fornication.²⁹ The pair *gula/luxuria* linking pleasures in tasting food or wine to sexual desires and temptations was formed in the fourth century CE, giving birth to a Christian literature warning laypersons and monastics against the danger of taste.³⁰

Two methods could be useful to control the perceived danger of gluttony: serving ordinary, bland or insipid food, and setting up days and periods of fasting, reducing both food intake and the quality of food consumed. Clement of Alexandria insists that simple food should be displayed on a Christian table, and he condemns the expensive culinary pleasures of the wealthy. Nevertheless, he admits that salt, which makes food taste better, should be used for that purpose and also to ease digestion.³¹ He condemns the search for new pleasures found in complex food preparations, which could alter one's health, and instead, he advertises the beneficial health effects of simple home cooking. He draws a moral limit for food expenses. He is, however, a moderate, opposed to the Encratites, who completely rejected meat and wine.³²

Compared with Clement of Alexandria, who admits the usefulness

of tasty food for easy digestion, the Cappadocian Fathers, especially Basil of Caesarea (d. 379), are very stern and anxious about taste and the enjoyment of food. Their concern with being indifferent to the taste of food is often expressed. Food is necessary to be able to work but should not become the source of pleasure. Their teaching opened the door to a monastic literature praising extreme fasting and the refusal of any food that could ignite passions in the body. Monastic tradition teaches that some food, such as meat, heats the blood and excites bodily appetites. In their classification of food, monks simply followed the common medical lore of the time.³³ But while for ancient medicine the justification for food privation was health-related, for monastic communities it stems from a moral concern. *Gula* is a most serious monastic sin, as Cassian explained to his community in Marseille. Monks and nuns have to fight greed and gluttony, which takes three forms: eating before mealtimes and thus disrupting the order of community life; gorging on food, which leads to gluttony; and exciting a desire for delicacies and artistically prepared dishes.³⁴ In addition, the pleasures of tasting good food open the door to other bodily pleasures and passions in the soul, making it difficult for the devout individual to rise above material concerns.

If a good monk should neither think about food nor eat greedily, the rule also applies to some extent to all pious Christians. Gluttony or the pleasure of taste is condemned in Christian literature as a sin that prevents the elevation of the soul to more spiritual matters, even in laymen. Gluttony anchors people in earthly matters, the Church Fathers suggest. Jerome (d. 420) promotes Christian asceticism when he writes to Eustochium, reminding her of countless texts scattered in the divine Scriptures which condemn greed and laud the value of simple foods. Following the Gospel of Luke, he warns her that overeating and drunkenness weigh down the heart. Too much food makes one drowsy, too much wine even more so, and both make it difficult for Christians to pray and keep vigil.

Similarly, in his *Treatise on Virginity*, Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394) warns Christians to be wary of pleasure generally, but especially of the pleasure of taste, because it is the mother of many sins. Satiety, as we have seen, feeds the sexual passions of the body, but the other passions are equally a matter of concern. Christians have to be temperate, and in order to achieve peace of mind and control over passions of the body, they need to control their intake of food and drink, and never feel full. To avoid eating more than necessary, the table should contain only ordinary, bland food and nothing should be

added that would make it too tasty. If food is insipid, the temptation to eat more than necessary vanishes. Gregory of Nyssa expresses fear that the pleasures of food and drink will create evils independent of our will. This fear relates particularly to those Christians who choose a monastic celibate life, but it also applies to lay Christians, since they too are called to live temperate lives and fight sinful passions. Basil of Caesarea also makes the importance of frugality clear, exhorting Christians to keep their distance from fancy foods and expensive gastronomy.³⁵ He is a strong critic of the banquet culture,³⁶ and his monastic rules condemn those who have abandoned themselves to the pleasures provided by the art of cooking.³⁷ Hospitality was an important tradition and monastic communities welcomed guests, but Basil encourages these communities to serve guests the same insipid and ordinary food that monks eat. He writes: “When you prepare for your brother’s table an abundance of food able to flatter taste-buds, you accuse him of being a slave to pleasure, you insult him by making him seem greedy, because you lend him such inclinations.”³⁸

Wealthy Christians are not exempt from the proscriptions of fine dining. John Chrysostom (d. 407) and Asterius of Amasea (d. 410) try to shame wealthy Christians who spend fortunes in serving rare and tasty foods when poor beggars are at their door. In their sermons, they remind their audience that the poor Lazarus, who would have been happy with crumbs falling from the rich table, went to heaven, while the rich who would not pay attention to his needs went to hell.³⁹ “Those who live in luxury, wear the best perfume and drink the finest wines, incur the condemnation of the Gospel, and the widow who surrenders to pleasure while alive is considered dead”, explains Basil.⁴⁰ Those who adopt frugal and charitable behaviour, by contrast, can expect to enter Paradise. Even Clement of Alexandria, who takes a more lenient view towards tasty food, entreated his audience neither to spend money on banquets nor to compete for the best cook and the best food.⁴¹

The taste of heaven: spiritual food and spiritual taste

As we have seen, ascetic tastes were *de rigueur* among the late antique Church Fathers so far as their religious orders and congregants were concerned. When, however, Christian authors describe the heavenly realm, the theme of the banquet is ubiquitous. Christ had compared

the entrance into the Kingdom of God to attendance at a wedding feast (Matthew 22:1–14). If Christians lived according to God's will, their reward would be a life of eternal bliss. The sixth-century CE anonymous *Life of Chariton* includes the farewell speech of Chariton to his monks. He refers to the parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 25:1–13) and explains that the soul may be soiled by sin, but that the monks can wash away their sins with compassion and repentance. Then, they will take part in the banquet of delights.⁴² Monastic discourse insists that the reward for depriving themselves of food now will be an eternal abundance of wonderful-tasting foods.

Some texts imagine that life in Paradise is free of the sense of taste and the accompanying digestive process entirely; instead saints feed on immaterial, wonderful perfumes.⁴³ The *Regula magistri* cites a vision recorded in the *Passio Sebastiani* that describes Paradise as a splendid fragrant garden:

Herbs with saffron flowers spread a balmy air, from the fields waft the exquisite fragrances filling them. ... Here winds carrying eternal life invade the nostrils. ... Bushes produce cinnamon, and from the shrubs, balm springs up. The fragrance of the air diffuses delectation in all the body.⁴⁴

This spiritual approach to Paradise was recommended to monks used to fasting, who were told to pay little attention to the pleasure of good taste. Yet, this was not the anticipation of most people, especially those who had suffered from hunger during their lifetime. For them and for the wealthy who had enjoyed great banquets, the dream of abundant and tasty food remained prominent, and writers offered them descriptions of unsurpassable banquets in the celestial Jerusalem and the promise of a wonderful taste experience in the next world. Like the scenes of feasting in Homer, descriptions of the heavenly banquet are rarely precise about the menu.⁴⁵ They hesitate between earthly foods, such as roasted meats, as one would expect at a wedding banquet, and the spiritual nourishment afforded by the Eucharist. In this literature describing the next world, food and taste satisfaction remain a central point. Most Christians, monks and nuns included, expected to be rewarded with a marvellous banquet and never again to experience the pain of hunger.

***Tasting the sweetness of god in the liturgy and the
cult of saints***

The doctrine of the spiritual senses enabled Christians to write about their mystical experience of God by comparing it to sensory experiences, including taste.⁴⁶ Liturgical poetry was written around Psalm 34:8: “taste and see that the Lord is good”. The word *chrēstos* means, in fact, pleasant to taste.

The sweetness of God was usually compared to tasting honey.⁴⁷ The paradigm comes from Exodus, where God is shown feeding His people with miraculous food that tastes delicious. When His people complain in the desert, God sends manna and quails. Manna “was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey”.⁴⁸ In the novel *Joseph and Aseneth*, the pretty Aseneth is not Jewish and eats sacrificial offerings to the Egyptian deities. She is defiled by the food she eats and in order to purify herself and be worthy of Joseph, she first throws away to the dogs all the food that was brought to her, then she fasts. After seven days, an angel visits, bringing her honey from heaven made by bees in Paradise; it is the food of angels. Whoever tastes this honey will never die, the angel explains.⁴⁹ A possible allusion to the Eucharist here makes it difficult to establish the Jewish origin of the text. In the ancient Church, before the Peace of the Church, honey was sometimes used in the Eucharistic liturgy. The Canons of Hippolytus mention a communion with milk and honey given to young children. The newly baptized adults are also given these elements in communion to signal that they have been born again like children.⁵⁰ In addition to the youthful associations, communion with milk and honey also alludes to Paradise, where milk and honey flow, and where there is no bitterness and no ageing. John Chrysostom perhaps ate a little bit of honey, after communion. It is, at least, one the accusations made against him at the Synod of the Oak in 403 CE, which proves that it was no longer considered acceptable to bring honey to the altar. At the end of antiquity, only bread and wine can be brought to the altar, while milk or honey are clearly excluded by a canon of the council in Trullo in 691/2 CE.⁵¹

As with the other senses, tasting the sweetness of God could be both practical and metaphorical: the bodily senses tasted bread and wine, while the spiritual sense of taste experienced the presence of God and His sweetness. In the liturgical practices of the Christian religion, the sense of taste is important because God, through Jesus, makes himself available in the Eucharist and can be tasted in the bread and wine offered during communion. Preachers insisted that taking communion allowed the baptized faithful to taste the sweetness of God, but they had to explain why the bread still tasted like bread

and not like flesh.⁵² In the third century CE, when women brought bread to church for the *prosphora*, it was sometimes difficult for them to make the leap of faith when they recognized their own loaf of bread on the altar. The risk was for the communicant to remain focused on the taste of bread and wine, and Cyril of Jerusalem warns his audience: “Entrust not the judgement to your bodily palate, but to unwavering faith. For in tasting you taste not bread and wine, but the antitypical Body and Blood of Christ.”⁵³ Eucharistic miracles, first in the Armenian tradition and then in the Byzantine or Latin one, showed that bread and wine covered actual flesh and blood, which would have been very repulsive to eat. This is why God disguised his body into easily consumable food, heavenly bread and a cup of salvation filled with wine.⁵⁴ Appearance and taste were, therefore, deceiving on purpose.

To make sure this bread was not taken for ordinary table bread, a complex ritual of preparation, consecration and reception was organized. The bread was stamped with letters and symbols. The catechumens and the penitents were expelled from the church before the consecration started. The *Cherubikon*, a song reminding those present that the “King of all” would come escorted by angelic orders, resonated at the start of the Byzantine ritual. The consecration was the most sacred moment of the liturgy, as attested by the presence of angels waiting for the Holy Spirit to consecrate the bread and for Christ to be present.

Finally, for the communion ritual, the faithful were to approach with awe, and touch the body of Christ with their hands before they could taste it. After drinking from the cup or chalice, they experienced the tincture of the blood of Christ on their lips and Cyril of Jerusalem tells the communicant to take this opportunity to sanctify their other senses.⁵⁵ Cyril further explains to the newly baptized, who have received communion for the first time:

For in the figure of bread His Body is given to you, and in the figure of wine His Blood, that by partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ you may become one body and blood with Him. For when His Body and Blood become the tissue of our members, we become Christ-bearers and as the blessed Peter said “partakers of the divine nature”.⁵⁶

This is why taste and touch are so closely connected. Tasting the Body of Christ was like touching Him and uniting with Him. Other rituals

included kissing the consecrated parcels of bread, called “the pearls” in the Syriac tradition, before eating them. The early seventh-century Gabriel of Qatar explains: “Whenever we take them in our hands we ought thus to think that we are embracing and kissing our Saviour himself, as we mingle his Body in our body, and mix his Blood in our blood.”

Tasting God in the Eucharist was a corner-stone experience, not to be approached lightly. Preachers warned the faithful to be pure of heart and body before taking communion. For some persons, tasting God in the consecrated elements took place only a few times in their life, while for others it happened at major religious festivals throughout the year and for others still, it took place on a weekly basis. Some monks brought consecrated bread to their cells and gave themselves communion every day with it. In order to receive communion, both clerics and laypeople had to prepare themselves: sexual and gustatory abstinence were two elements required from those taking communion. Fasting was especially important in order to fully enjoy the consecrated bread and wine, which should not be confused with breakfast and ordinary food. The rules of the eleventh-century CE Maronite canons are quite strict: nothing to eat or drink after midnight, even a cup of water interrupts the fast, or chewing a mustard seed or kissing one’s spouse.⁵⁷ Thus, we see that even in the medieval period the lips were still considered an organ of taste.⁵⁸

Those who did not feel pure enough to take communion could still take eulogy breads, or blessed bread, which was the most common gift distributed by sanctuaries. Often adorned with religious iconography such as crosses, images of saints or scenes from the life of Christ, stamped blessed breads were given to pilgrims to bring home.



Figure 13.1 Bread stamp with the image of St Philip. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund (photo: Travis Fullerton)

With the bread, pilgrims believed they carried away some of the sanctity of the church they had visited. An inscription often explained that these stamped breads were “a blessing of the Lord”. Loaded with sensory nuances, this was no ordinary food, even if it tasted like regular bread. An invisible ingredient made it special and, perhaps, taste better: it was blessed and some expected it to carry protective or even healing powers. Part of this power came from the words of blessing spoken over the bread or inscribed on it; part of it came from the image itself. “Edible icons”, wax or clay images of the saints, were deemed to have curative powers because of the image of the saint stamped on them.⁵⁹ The *Life of Symeon Stylite the Younger* mentions clay tokens stamped with the image of the saint on his column, which could be reduced to dust and given to sick people to drink.⁶⁰ Pilgrims had been known to scratch paint from icons of the saints to put in drinks that they hoped would cure them. Tasting the healing and sanctifying power of the saints in a drink or in a piece of bread was

the goal of all these rituals.

Hagiographic literature reinforced these practices. In miracle stories, the medical advice given by saints sometimes included food and drinks. In the *Thaumata* written by Sophronios (future patriarch of Jerusalem, d. 638), the saints Cyrus and John, in dreams, came to sick pilgrims asleep in their church at Menouthis in Egypt and prescribed a cure. They told a sick woman named Elpidia to add myrtle to wine and drink it.⁶¹ If the saints did not give advice, pilgrims approached the reliquaries in order to capture the saint's healing powers. Some reliquaries had holes to allow oil or wine to pour through and enter into contact with relics. Pilgrims would consider this contact a means of capturing the holiness of the saint. They also asked for the oil burning in the lamps hanging close to the relics of the saints. They brought that oil back in little flasks and believed it had power as a medicine. Sanctuaries advertised the power of the saints to heal, and they gave or sold little flasks, often called *ampullae*, to fill with blessed water or oil that had been poured from the lamps above saints' tombs, or miraculously provided by myrrh-giving saints.

Tasting the medicine of the saints was not reserved for the uneducated masses, as scholars have long believed. The hagiaσμα of the monastery of the Theotokos of Pege had the reputation to cure those who drank its water, because the mother of God had blessed it.⁶² This monastery, dated to the sixth century CE, was located in a suburb of Constantinople and attracted members of the Byzantine aristocracy and even the imperial family.⁶³

All of these examples show how much taste was involved in Christian religious rituals of the late antique and medieval period. Unlike liturgical singing, which was a collective activity, most of these rituals were very personal and provided a spiritual experience as well as a physical one.⁶⁴

Conclusion

Christians are encouraged to relish the spiritually and physically powerful tastes of the Eucharist and the medicine of the saints, while simultaneously being asked to control their desires for the pleasant tastes of plate and cup in order to enhance their spiritual connection with the divine. Such a dichotomy reflects the complex relationship the Church has with the senses, viewed as bodily and base, and yet capable of revealing great spiritual truths.

In this chapter – as well as others in this volume – we have explored how the senses in general – and taste in particular – set us on a pathway to divine knowledge, but also lead us to the gates of vice.⁶⁵ As in the pagan myths and traditions explored by Hitch and Warren, I have shown how taste plays an important role in early Christian liturgical practices, where the promise of a wonderful banquet in the afterlife illustrates how Christians imagined that God would reward the saints by eternally pleasing their taste-buds. However, artistic cooking and gastronomy – of a literal and metaphorical sort – were frowned upon in patristic literature not only for monastic circles but for wider society as well.⁶⁶ Lay people were taught that a disorderly desire for food, an excessive enjoyment of dishes, led them away from tasting spiritual realities and into sin. The search for tasty and expensive food in this life was clearly condemned by late antique Christian writers, for whom the moral strength engendered by abstention from all but the most simple and insipid flavours formed the basis of an asceticism built on sensory norms inherited both from the Jewish biblical and from the Greek philosophical traditions.⁶⁷

Christians also created their own food culture. The openness of the early Christian Church reflected the plethora of dietary preferences held by its Greek, Roman and Jewish adherents. By mixing elements from the past, drawing from the Greek medical traditions, Jewish dietary laws and Jesus' New Testament teachings, the presence and absence of certain tastes – like certain smells – provided a way for Christian communities to define themselves in relation to others. This, too, underscores what we have seen in earlier chapters; namely, that for all of the physiological, environmental and technological factors that contribute to the flavour of foods, taste remains an essential marker of socio-cultural attitudes.⁶⁸

Christians created their own literary discourse around taste as well. Much was inherited from Jewish and Graeco-Roman literature, including the dangerous aspects of taste (in which images of the forbidden fruit and the sexuality of tasting intertwine) and its supernatural and synaesthetic delights (where wedding feasts and the pure milk of the word delight the spirit and the senses). The late antique Christian literary tradition also plays upon the intermingling of sensory experiences, which reveals the self to the world, and the world to the self, with all its physical delights and cognitive benefits but also with all the dangers such exchange reveals. Thus, we find that the gustatory elements explored in this chapter – and indeed, throughout this volume – reveal the paradoxical nature of taste in the

- 1Fulton (2006: 170).
- 2See McKinnon ([Chapter 9](#)) for a discussion of meat consumption and its relation to religious orthodoxies.
- 31 Peter 2:1–3.
- 4Frank (2001: 619–43); Gavriluk & Coakley (2012).
- 5On the origin of the sensory hierarchy in Plato and Aristotle, see Rudolph's introduction to this volume and [Chapter 2](#).
- 6See Caseau (2015). Toner (2014) explores Christian innovations in using and representing the senses, and particularly smell, in defining the structure of their communities in relation to pre-existing pagan and Jewish traditions. Smell, like taste, was essential to defining what Christians were *not* as much as what they were.
- 7Rosenblum (2010).
- 8Mark 7:19.
- 9Acts 10:9–16.
- 10Acts 10:27–28.
- 11Acts 15:19–20, 27. Cf. Leviticus 7:26, Exodus 34:11–16 and Numbers 25:1–2.
- 12Cf. Acts 15:20: ἀπέχεσθαι τῶν ἀλισθημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων.
- 131 Corinthians 10.
- 14Romans 14–15.
- 15Romans 14:2–3, 13–15.
- 16Weingarten (2007).
- 171 Corinthians 8:13.
- 18Shaw (1998).
- 191 Corinthians 10:25.
- 201 Corinthians 10:27–29.
- 21Philo of Alexandria, *The Special Laws (De specialibus legibus)* 4.100 in Mosès (1970: 258–60): εὐσάρκωτα καὶ γαργαλίζοντα καὶ ἐρεθίζοντα τὴν ἐπίβουλον ἡδονήν.
- 22*Epistle of Barnabas* in Kraft & Prigent (1971: 150–1).
- 23Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 5.51.4 in Le Boulluec & Voulet (2006: 108).
- 24Clement of Alexandria, *The Teacher*, Book 3, 11.75.3 in Mondésert & Matray (1970: 146–7).
- 25Plato, *Republic* 372e–376e. On taste metaphor in Plato, see Rudolph, [Chapter 2](#). See Toner (2014) on the moral associations of odour and Clement's hostility to the pleasure of the senses.
- 26See Warren's discussion of hierophagy in [Chapter 6](#).
- 27In the garden of Eden, some of the fruits procured eternal life, others the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:9). See Hitch ([Chapter 1](#)) for a discussion of a similarly supernatural productive land in Homer.
- 28Quellier (2010); Grimm (1996).
- 29Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos* 6.
- 30See Rudolph (introduction to this volume), Telò ([Chapter 4](#)) and Gowers ([Chapter 5](#)) for further discussion of the link between sexuality and taste.
- 31Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 2.20.119 in Camelot & Mondésert (1954: 124); on salt, see Banducci ([Chapter 7](#)).
- 32Brown (1988: 92–3); Grimm (1996: 107).
- 33Caseau (2015: 138–43). On medical uses of taste see Totelin ([Chapter 3](#)) and Baker ([Chapter 8](#)).
- 34Cassian, *Cenobitic Institutions* 5.23 in Guy (1965: 230).

- 35Caseau (2015: 201).
- 36Malmberg (2003).
- 37Basil of Caesarea, *Rules*, question 55.3, PG 31, col. 1048.
- 38Basil of Caesarea, *Rules*, question 20.3: What table to offer to guests?, PG 31, col. 973.
- 39Holman (2001).
- 40Basil of Caesarea, *Rules*, question 20.1, PG 31, col. 972.
- 41Caseau (2015: 135–6).
- 42*Life of Chariton*, 34 in Garitte (1941); see di Segni (1990: 416). Cf. the association between divine benevolence and spontaneous food production in Hitch ([Chapter 1](#)) and the depiction of the underworld in Warren ([Chapter 6](#)).
- 43On sensual smells in early Christianity, see Toner (2014).
- 44*Regula Magistri*, 10.13 in Vogüé (1964: 440–2).
- 45See Hitch ([Chapter 1](#)).
- 46Gavrilyuk & Coakley (2012).
- 47For similar connections in early Greek literature see Hitch ([Chapter 1](#)). On honey, see Totelin ([Chapter 3](#)). Cf. Warren ([Chapter 6](#)).
- 48Exodus 16:31.
- 49*Joseph and Aseneth* 4 in Philonenko (1968: 140–1). This text is either Jewish (first century BCE to second century CE) or Christian (third to fourth century CE). See Kraemer (1998); Nir (2012); on hierophagy see Warren ([Chapter 6](#)).
- 50*Canons of Hippolytus* c. 21 in Coquin (1969: 385).
- 51Council in Trullo c. 37 in Joannou (1962: 194); Nedungatt & Featherstone (1995: 115–16).
- 52Frank (2009).
- 53Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis* 4, trans. in MacCauley & Stephenson (1970: 181–2).
- 54Garsoian (2009). See Kilgour (1990) for analysis of the link between communion and cannibalism.
- 55Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis* 5.22 in Piédagnel (1966: 172).
- 56Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis* 4, trans. in MacCauley & Stephenson (1970: 202).
- 57Khoury (1966).
- 58See Rudolph's discussion of the mouth in the introduction to this volume and Gowers ([Chapter 5](#)) for the playful lips in Roman taste metaphors.
- 59Vikan (1989).
- 60*Life of Symeon Stylite the Younger* 232 in Van den Ven (1962: 209).
- 61Sophronios, *Thaumata*, miracle 25.6 in Marcos (1975: 290).
- 62Efthymiadis (2006–7); Talbot (2002a); Talbot (2002b).
- 63Janin (1969: 223–8).
- 64Caseau (2005); Vikan (1998); Grabar (1958).
- 65See Warren ([Chapter 6](#)) on taste and the divine realm; on dangerous foods and the moral connotations of taste see Hitch ([Chapter 1](#)) and Gowers ([Chapter 5](#)).
- 66In this respect, Christianity shares features with some elements of Greek and Roman culture. See Hitch ([Chapter 1](#)) on comedic gastronomes in Aristophanes; Telò ([Chapter 4](#)) on gastronomic delicacies in a literary feast; Gowers ([Chapter 5](#)) on taste metaphors in Roman literature, including discussion of Augustine; Baker ([Chapter 8](#)) on simple foods in the Roman diet.
- 67On taste and knowledge in ancient philosophy, see Rudolph ([Chapter 2](#)).
- 68On the interplay between nature and culture see Totelin ([Chapter 3](#)) on plants; Banducci ([Chapter 7](#)) on environment, cooking methods and the Romanization of tastes; MacKinnon ([Chapter 9](#)) on meat; Livarda ([Chapter 10](#)) on changes of taste in the Roman provinces; Boulay ([Chapter 11](#)) on the tastes and sensorial

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